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4

THE WORLD'S LEAST INTERESTING MASTER SWORDSMAN

Table of Contents

Cover
Color Illustrations
Part 1 — Accession
Part 2 — Custom
Part 3 — Toad
Part 4 — Divine Beast
Part 5 — Meaning
Part 6 — Discussion
Part 7 — Alignment
Part 8 — Setback
Part 9 — Reason
Part 10 — Arrogance
Part 11 — Self-Control
Part 12 — Out of Control
Part 13 — Breaking Free
Part 14 — Suspicion
Part 15 — Accumulation
Part 16 — Shame
Part 17 — Immortal Arts
Part 18 — Meeting
Part 19 — See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Say No Evil
Part 20 — Role
Side Story — Contradictions
Afterword
Bonus Short Story
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

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Part 1 — Accession

Part 2 — Custom

Part 3 — Toad

Part 4 — Divine Beast

Part 5 — Meaning

Part 6 — Discussion

Part 7 — Alignment

Part 8 — Setback

Part 9 — Reason

Part 10 — Arrogance

Part 11 — Self-Control

Part 12 — Out of Control

Part 13 — Breaking Free

Part 14 — Suspicion

Part 15 — Accumulation

Part 16 — Shame

Part 17 — Immortal Arts

Part 18 — Meeting

Part 19 — See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Say No Evil

Part 20 — Role

Side Story — Contradictions

Afterword

Bonus Short Story

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Copyright

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Part 1 — Accession

The Eight Sacred Treasures...

A sword that can only be wielded by those seeking strength, capable of boosting all forms of magic... The Ultimate Legendary Sword, Eckesachs.

A blade that can only be wielded by those seeking vengeance, capable of draining the living blood out of its target... The Demon Blade of Vengeance, Dainsleif.

A mirror that can only be used by those who have no compunction about using a tool until it breaks, capable of creating countless copies of objects... The Mirror of Consumption's Truth, Ungaikyo.

A spear that can only be wielded by those fighting against powerful authorities, capable of freely controlling the weather... The Divine Spear of Rebellion, Vajra.

A chalice that can only be used by those with a strong desire to live, capable of sustaining that survival indefinitely... The Sacred Chalice of Will, Elixir.

A silo that can only be used by those with an endless spirit of charity, capable of creating infinite food... The Bountiful Silo of Compassion, Danua.

A ship that can be used by anyone who wants to avoid death, capable of incredible defense... The Ark of Survival, Noah.

And the armor that can only be worn by those with a death wish, with a far too macabre power... The Armor of Entropy and Disaster, Pandora.

Eight treasures that the God who created this world in turn created for humanity. Divine Treasures that, despite fulfilling their purpose, occasionally return to the mortal stage of history and choose new masters. All of them, after a period of ten thousand years, are about to reunite in the Arcana Kingdom.

'A ship is falling from the sky.' Had anyone but Sansui said those words, the response would have been dismissive laughter. If there hadn't been five of the Sacred Treasures in that spot, no doubt they wouldn't have had any certainty about what was raining down from above. Further, had Dainsleif not described Shouzo's magic as being too much 'even for Noah,' it may have taken them longer to figure it out.

"...What are the chances?"

Having cast an enormous spell into the air, the spell directly impacted said Noah. When considering the probabilities, Sansui's observation ceases to be funny. However, all of those present could just make out that something very large, consumed in fire, was falling toward the ground. Moreover, at this rate, it might hit them directly, and even if it didn't, it wouldn't be a pleasant sight to watch.

"Uh, I'll put this out there now, but I can't do anything but break stuff."

Shouzo, feeling that he might be called upon to try something, makes clear that there's nothing he can do. Of course, there's the off chance that he might have to vaporize the object before it hits anyone or anything else, but fortunately there's nothing in the vicinity that's at risk, save the humans on the ground.

"Saiga."

While calm, evidently Sansui doesn't have the luxury of formality, and reaches over to grab Eckesachs by the shoulder as she stands in mute shock next to Saiga.

"I'm borrowing her. Is that fine?"

"Y-Yeah, sure."

The situation is reasonably dire. It certainly feels faintly like a bad joke, but letting a Sacred Treasure be destroyed in front of the others isn't a pleasant thought. And if Sansui says he can do it, then he won't fail.

"Eckesachs, this is the second time, but I need your strength."

"O-Of course…"

Just as Dainsleif can detect the blood of those it's cut, how Vajra can forecast the weather, and how Ungaikyo can appraise items that are reflected on her surface, Eckesachs also has a special sense. That is, she can determine if someone touching her is one seeking to become 'the greatest,' and to reject those who aren't from touching her at all. Of course, Sansui as Suiboku's apprentice, is one permitted to wield her.

Just like his master did all those centuries ago, he takes the legendary sword in hand, then issues instructions to the others.

"Vajra, would you mind creating a slight updraft? It doesn't have to be anything like a tornado, just a light one."

"Pardon? Do that yourself! You're an Immortal, aren't you?!"

"My Master taught me how to ride the wind, but not how to *create* wind. I need you to create some natural wind for me."

The sight of Immortals riding clouds is an image that's been recorded in artwork in a handful of places in this world. And Sansui, like any other Immortal, can certainly go lie down atop a cloud.

However, he's never wanted to try it. Part of that stems from that he doesn't have much in the way of wasteful physical desire, being an Immortal, but he also thinks that flying up that high into the air is a hassle. This is because Flash Step doesn't operate vertically, and he has no other means of rapid movement.

He could just jump, technically. However, to move higher into the air using Feather Step simply takes too much time, and it's easier for him to ride the wind when it's a natural wind, like one created by a Sacred Treasure, rather than the artificial wind brought into being by magic.

"Stop complaining. Let's do this."

Ukyou rather hurriedly forces Vajra to turn into a spear. It's not like he's a madman or that he has a compulsion to destroy things, really. This sequence of events might not have been intentional, but it was still a result

of his pleading. He can't help but feel a slight bit of panic for destroying something so randomly.

"An upward draft is what you want, right?"

"Yes. Once I'm floating, I'll just ride that up."

Even he can't generate enough wind to lift an object falling from the sky. That might not be the case if he were to generate a sufficiently powerful tornado, but that requires a specific set of environmental conditions, which makes the whole process somewhat difficult.

Still, in the end, it's a gust of wind created by a Sacred Treasure. A gale so powerful that no one present can keep their eyes open blasts up from below.

"Blois, come with me!"

"Understood!"

Sansui rides the wind, carrying Blois and Eckesachs into the sky. Climbing at an impressive rate, the pair make slight adjustments in their flight path toward the giant ship approaching from ahead.

It appears that it's not quite the size of a luxury cruise-liner or a warship. Still, the hull, half-consumed with flames, is obviously much larger than both of them.

"It's Noah! The largest of us Sacred Treasures!"

"Blois, I'm going to levitate the hull! Can you…"

"Blow away the debris? I'm already on it."

The burning pieces of debris begin to scatter as they fall. From the trajectory of the hull, it's clear that it's unlikely to hit those below, but the debris is another matter entirely. The burning shrapnel, carried by the wind, could very well fall anywhere.

"I'll blast it away using my wind!"

"No, leave that to Saiga!"

"Blois, was it? Look up above you!"

Sansui and Eckesachs have already touched the burning hull and activated Feather Step. While Feather Step can levitate anything, so long as it's not secured to the ground, the object in question is Noah and her extremely potent defenses. Even if this isn't an attack, it's difficult to manipulate it without the aid of the legendary sword.

"Above… A person?!"

Blois glances up while knocking away the debris, catching sight of a person's silhouette falling from above. The instant she sees it, she adjusts her position and slowly approaches. Sending a gentle wind upward, she adjusts the falling speed of the person tumbling downward slowing them down.

Blois orients the falling victim so that they're falling parallel to the ground, like a sky-diver, rather than head-first. That alone visibly slows the victim's falling speed. Then, while making sure to minimize their relative difference in speed, Blois firmly takes hold of her body.

"So, this is Noah's owner…"

Perhaps she was lucky in being the only one aboard Noah, or perhaps her people were so unlucky as to only be left with a single individual fleeing on Noah, but she's the only one falling from the sky.

Blois thus reduces her falling speed without knowing who she's carrying in her arms. She, of course, continues to blast away the debris falling from above at the same time.

"Still... Just what are the odds."

Glancing upward again, she catches sight of the slowly descending hull and Sansui pressed up against it. In a sense, he's got the easier task, so she has no concerns there.

A glance downward reveals that Lord Caputo, Saiga, and Shouzo's escorts have crafted a multi-layered wall. The magical wall is so strongly constructed that it could take far more punishment than mere pieces of hull falling from the sky, and as a result, everyone beneath is completely unharmed.

Once she's finished checking those two directions, Blois looks over the one in her arms. Evidently suffering from vertigo, she's out cold, and doesn't look like she'll be moving anytime soon. She was actually thankful for that, and she feels a wave of relief after confirming what she looks like.

"So this girl is Noah's owner? Since she doesn't have black hair, she doesn't seem to be one of Sansui's countrymen."

She's a small woman with green hair. As everyone would prefer to avoid any further chaos, Blois chooses to be thankful for the lack of any additional complications.

Sansui slowly descends from above. The ship, half-destroyed and burning, lands in what can barely be called one piece. Before any of that happens, Blois returns to her master's side below the walls of light.

"Remarkable... We still find it hard to believe that we've seen Noah the Ark with our own eyes..." the Arcanian King says, clearly in awe.

The ship said to be the largest of the legendary Eight Sacred Treasures... There's enough of her grand appearance left in the wreckage to make an observer regret seeing her in this state.

"I didn't expect there to be someone up there..."

In a somewhat delayed reaction, Shouzo slumps his shoulders at the knowledge that he hurt someone with his magic. It probably would have been a little better if the destroyed ark had been a bit more comedic in appearance, but it looked like a ship used to force open the route to the last dungeon in a video game.

"Don't worry about it. It's my fault, all my fault. I mean, who the hell could've imagined there'd be a Sacred Treasure flying overhead? Anyway, I owe them an apology. Isn't that right, Elixir?"

"Yes, leave this to me!"

Noah continues to smolder on the plains, resting on her side to avoid tipping over. Making his way toward it, Ukyou holds the Sacred Chalice, Elixir, in his hand. He then splashes the clear liquid in the chalice upon the

burning Noah. That's all it takes to put out the burning ark, extinguishing out the fires everywhere, even in spots where the liquid didn't land.

"This is the power of Elixir, the Sacred Chalice. She's got the power to fix things that are broken…though that's limited to objects."

"Hahah! You've managed to avoid returning to God this time, Noah! Your end hasn't come, meaning you still have things that you must accomplish in this world!"

The fire is out, but the hull is still a wreck. Well, okay, a wreck, but the debris is also slowly gathering itself onto the hull, as though the ship was pulling itself together. It was, in essence, a living organism, and it was healing itself.

"Still, given how big this is, it might take a while to fix."

"Indeed. Noah appears to have thrown up some defenses and tried to avoid the spell. To be expected of an ark of refuge, perhaps."

It does seem that the accidentally crashed Noah will slowly be fixed, and thus, apologies will be possible. The gathering let out a collective sigh of relief. There's certainly something to be said for not accidentally destroying a legendary ship by getting carried away.

"…Would you mind if I explained the situation to those present?" Dainsleif asks, seeking out permission to explain the situation. She's acting under the considerate assumption that the Sacred Treasures have a full grasp of the situation, but that there are those present without the full picture.

The only obvious answer here is silent approval. This is as good a situation as any to hear things directly from the Sacred Treasure's mouth.

"We, the Eight Sacred Treasures, have always had one of three responses when our wielders die. The first is to wait for a new wielder. Eckesachs and Pandora are examples of this approach. The reason they were stored in your kingdom is because those objects were waiting for new candidates."

Ukyou, having already heard these details, looks over at the ark regretfully. It may be asking for too much, but perhaps things would have played out differently had he also owned Noah.

"The second is that we return to God, our creator. This is what happened with the four of us. As such, God decides on our next wielder. Now, when any of us is destroyed, we automatically get sent back to God. This is true even if the previous wielder is still alive."

The Japanese members of the gathering let out a murmur of understanding. Since they went through a similar experience themselves, they can't do anything but find this explanation convincing.

But this was also true of those born in this world, because it was frankly absurd for a single individual to have four of the treasures. It makes more sense to be told that God handed them to the owner directly.

"The last are Noah and Danua. They…wander…without a set master."

She can’t mask the disdain behind her words. The gaze she directs at the burning Noah is neither gentle nor mournful. If one had to put a word to the emotion, it would have to be contempt.

“Noah, well… The reason she has no master is understandable. She is, after all, a tool that is best left unused.”

The natives tilt their heads in puzzlement. Tools only exist to be used. Even ones created by God have a purpose, since they’re still tools. Even toys have the purpose of providing fulfilling uses for free time. So, what does it mean that a tool would deny their own utility?

“Wait, is it supposed to be like a life vest?” Saiga says, remembering what ‘Noah’s Ark’ was built for in his own world.

Noah’s Ark existed to escape God’s wrath. More specifically, to protect people from a great flood.

“Ukyou said the same thing, and it’s about right. Noah is designed not for transportation, but rather for escape. She accepts those who don’t want to die as her master, and exists to take them to safety.”

The world’s natives are also able to grasp most of what Dainsleif says. Something like the small lifeboats equipped on sailing vessels as a last resort. In that case, it’s best that something like that isn’t used at all. After all, using it means the wielder is in quite a bit of trouble already. But what they don’t understand is why she refuses to take a master. At the very least, shouldn’t she stick around the world’s surface, just in case she’s needed?

“The issue is that the environment inside the ark is comfortable. Or, more precisely, it forces the individuals inside to remain in an optimistic frame of mind.”

Those present react with a mix of revulsion and understanding. Certainly, a sense of hope is necessary for the refugees. Still, forcing it sounds sort of wrong.

“It’s not that it’s addictive or anything of the sort. However, it’s one thing if the master is someone with a strong will like Elixir, but there are countless people in this world who don’t want to die. And as such, most of those rescued end up trying to live inside this ark. As ridiculous as it sounds, this one didn’t like that.”

Humans generally react to this story by agreeing with the sentiment that they wouldn’t want to be used that way either. After all, it’s a ship designed for emergency escapes, and having it used as a shelter for shut-ins is hardly suitable. At the very least, from a human point of view, this is a perfectly understandable sentiment. However, it doesn’t seem to be true from a proper tool’s perspective.

“Foolish, as no one, not even the creator, has any right to restrict how a tool is used. If they want to use her as a house, then she should function as a house.” says Dainsleif, a tool herself, denying the validity of that thought process.

“The truth is that the safest place in the world is inside her. If they want to live there, then she should let them. It’s as simple as that.”

Dainsleif herself is a Demon Blade designed for revenge, but she's been used in ways other than that as well. For example, her wielders have had her absorb some of their own blood to find long-lost family members, or more simply, used her for preparing meat. As such, she's been used in ways that even went firmly against her creator's intentions. Dainsleif has no problem with that, but she apparently can't forgive Noah's arrogance.

"...Wait. Then what about her?"

At Shouzo's question, everyone's attention turns to the girl who fell from the sky and now lays unconscious on the ground.

Yes, if Noah doesn't have a wielder, then who is this young woman? If she's Noah's wielder, then chastising Noah for not taking a wielder seems rather odd.

"Before that, we need to explain another Sacred Treasure."

"I shall explain Danua. You don't mind, do you, Dainsleif?"

Dainsleif doesn't answer the question, and Ungaikyo takes over. The young woman laying on the ground has green hair, is dressed as though she had just been working out in the fields, and is a little chubby. She looked like she'd fit in pretty well if she were put down in a random village.

"Danua, the Silo of Plenty... The Sacred Treasure who accepts those with a charitable heart as her master and allows the user to produce infinite prepared dishes from her. She shares the sense of taste with the one seeking food, and she can recreate any food that the wielder has eaten."

In a sense, she's a similar type of Sacred Treasure to Ungaikyo, who can create an infinite number of replicas of an object. However, the gaze Ungaikyo directs to her is close to outright hostility.

"Just as my replicas vanish in a year, Danua's dishes vanish after a single day. Once consumed, however, the body still absorbs it. Overeating can result in obesity and overdrinking… Well, I'm sure that would result in illness."

Those details have left their impression on the world's myths. The dishes produced by Danua vanish after a single evening, and as such, they can't be preserved.

"Still, there's nothing wrong with that. I'm not much different, after all. The problem, however, is Danua's own philosophy. This one didn't like that limitation, and started pretending to be a human."

That came from the very problem Ukyou faces at present. Even if she can temporarily alleviate food shortages, the problem remains over the long term. While today's meal is more important than the country's wealth a century from now, the next year's harvest is equally important.

"Because her food vanishes after a single day, no matter how hard she tries, she can't fulfill all of the starving masses. Coming to that conclusion, Danua...decided to try to create food like a human would."

Those present have trouble digesting those words. They couldn't figure out what that even meant.

“Ukyou called it a governing cheat, but yes, that’s about the gist of it. Danua took advantage of the fact that she’s a tool capable of taking human form and began acquiring agricultural skills. Using her accumulated knowledge, she goes around solving each region’s food shortages.”

Rather than serve as a tool that creates infinite food, she goes around teaching efficient farming techniques by studying agriculture as an unaging human. Depending on the situation, no doubt it’s more effective than creating infinite dishes that disappear in a day. However, Ungaikyo sounds thoroughly irritated when describing this servant of humanity.

“We are tools crafted by God, not people. It isn’t a matter of which is superior. We’re simply fundamentally different things. Yet this fool… To act on her own without human intervention!”

Ungaikyo kicks the girl lying on the ground, looking far removed from her usual elegant appearance.

With that demonstration, even Shouzo understands. This young woman isn’t Noah’s wielder, but one of the Eight Sacred Treasures.

“Up you get, Danua!”

Ukyou had been informed in advance that Danua and Noah were traveling together. Sansui, reading her aura, recognizes that she’s a Sacred Treasure like Eckesachs. And at this moment, everyone else present understands that the young woman is, in fact, Danua, the Silo of Plenty, the relic that can create an endless supply of food.

“Urgh…”

“Wake up! To pass out simply from falling to the ground, given your toughness! You’re an embarrassment to us all!”

The green-haired young woman sits up. After a moment of staring off into the distance, she looks to Noah repairing herself behind her, and Sansui holding Eckesachs in front of her.

“Oh, Lawd have mercy~~!”

With words that are influenced by some rural dialect, Danua ignores Ungaikyo and grabs on to Sansui.

“You’re Suiboku’s apprentice, ain’t you?! To do that to Noah… I’m never gonna forgive you!”

“Err, no, I…”

“Don’t play stupid! You can’t claim to be unrelated to Suiboku, when you’ve got Eckesachs in hand and you’re dressed like that! You got a lot to answer for!”

Just as Ungaikyo was angry at Danua, Danua is now raging at Sansui.

She rages like an angry god, yelling at him as though he's the one thing in the world she can't accept.

"What did Noah ever do to you?! All she was doing was flying in the air! Why'd ya blast her?!"

"W-Wait, hang on! I'm the one that blasted her, Danua!" Shouzo hurriedly interjects. Yes, Sansui hadn't done anything wrong. Shouzo was the one who had fired the spell. If anything, Sansui was the one who had saved Noah.

"Lawd have mercy! Just how did you manage to do that to Noah without Eckesachs?!"

"Oh, with magic sort of like this…"

"No way some magic could do that!"

She's not wrong, generally speaking, so it'll be hard to convince her otherwise. It's not like he can demonstrate his power in front of her. It's entirely possible he'd shoot something else down if he did it again.

"Noah was… Noah was always here to help me! At this rate she'll end up back at the Lawd's feet!"

"P-Please calm down. I may be Suiboku's apprentice, but I'm not Eckesachs's master. I'm just borrowing her from the gentleman over there…"

"You're an apprentice to a man playing with swords without even eating! If you have time to be swinging a sword, pick up a hoe and work a field! You think you're important just because you have a sword on your hip?!" Danua yells, attacking in ways that are a bit hard to refute.

Behind her is Ungaikyo, shaking, with her hands balled into fists, and Dainsleif trying to calm her. The situation is just getting more chaotic by the second.

"Ungaikyo, you are in the right, but our master is responsible for this incident. Don't kick her in the head when we were the ones who shot her down."

"I know… But the first thing she does after getting up is give a lecture…"

Putting aside the arguments from the individual Sacred Treasures, the ones responsible for this little incident are Ukyou and Shouzo. At the very least, the King and Lord Caputo, who gave permission to Shouzo to use his magic, are surely blameless.

"Hahahah! Quite the spirit, Danua! I feel your passion for farming!"

On the other hand, completely ignoring the atmosphere is Elixir, now returned to her form as a young woman dressed in men's clothes. She pats Danua firmly on the shoulder, stopping her in place. Danua, of course, is aware that Elixir has the power to help Noah.

"Oh my Lawd! If it ain't Elixir! It's been ages! Wait, are you the one that…"

"Indeed, she's already beginning to fix herself. No doubt she will be back to her normal self by morning!"

“O-Oh bless you! Bless your heart, Eli! I’m so grateful!”

The two Sacred Treasures warmly embrace to celebrate their reunion. It’s in complete contrast to the mood around them, but it means that Sansui’s no longer the target of Danua’s ire. Taking advantage of this newfound freedom, Sansui hands Eckesachs back to Saiga. He’s come to the conclusion that nothing good would come from hanging on to Eckesachs.

“I trust your farming efforts are going well?”

“We farming folk are always at the mercy of the earth and sky. We have times when we gotta deal with things like locusts, and it don’t always go the way we want it to. Plenty of times, I found myself wishing Vajra was around… Even if I actually know better.”

“I see. I’m afraid that’s outside of my expertise, but it sounds like quite the effort! But you have no intention of giving up, yes?”

“Of course not! Noah and I will go anywhere so long as there’s people needing a full belly!”

“I see, I see. Then I have something to ask of you. You see, our master is currently governing a country, but I’m told their farming techniques are quite behind the times. I’m afraid I don’t understand the details, but I’m told there is a bad harvest at least once every few years. We are in dire need of a specialist equipped with both knowledge and experience!” Elixir proclaims, changing the subject on a dime. Everyone present can only marvel at her skill.

“Wha, you’re serving a king now?!?”

“Yes, a feared dictator at that! He says ‘jump’ and everyone asks how high!”

“Meaning no one’s gonna complain if I spread manure as fertilizer?”

“Indeed! In fact, you can make all of the citizens spread the manure, if you wish!”

The King and Lord Caputo realize it at that moment. A heartbeat later Setenve and Ukyou also come to the same conclusion. They’re watching a fifth Sacred Treasure being invited to the Domino Republic.

“So all the farmers in the country will do as I say?!”

“Indeed, so long as you work for our master!”

“Oh my Lawd! I’ll work harder than ever!”

Danua celebrates being able to give orders to an entire country, completely forgetting about her best friend smoldering in the background. Elixir, having nepotistically hired a relation to take up the vital task of managing the country’s agriculture, gives her master a thumbs-up.

“…Master, do make sure you don’t put me together with her.”

“Uh, okay.”

As Ungaikyo literally quakes with rage, Ukyou can only nod in acknowledgment.

Part 2 — Custom

“Alright, then, once Noah’s all fixed up, we’ll all head to the king! ...Hey! Everyone but Pandora’s here!” Danua says, finally noticing that little detail. Those present can only shake their heads at her delayed reaction.

The Eight Sacred Treasures crafted by God... All of them, other than Pandora, currently utilized by House Disaea, are assembled in this spot. And further, it’s now been decided that Ukyou would continue to use five of them himself. If left alone, he could very well end up with six of the eight.

“...We understand you need Danua, the Silo of Plenty. However, to have you possess six of them...”

The King of Arcana wanted to secure Noah, at the bare minimum. Even if Ukyou needs Danua, letting him have both of them is a bridge too far.

“Mm... Yes, I suppose you’re right. Nothing good comes from being greedy.”

Danua, the Silo of Plenty and Noah the Ark. They’re both currently at this spot, and having both of them would solve quite a few problems. But wanting them both is just asking for too much. Scuttling the peace treaty would be self-defeating.

“I’m not going to make a move for Noah,” Ukyou replies, quickly accepting the Arcanian King’s words.

“Oh yeah?! Just how do you think I’ll get to the hungry folk if I don’t have Noah?” Danua retorts, disagreeing vehemently.

It’s not as though Noah is a particularly fast method of travel. Still, a ship that can travel without regard to terrain provides enormous carrying potential, and for Danua, that’s a hard thing to compromise on.

“To have nothing to eat for a day or two... You know what it’s like to be a babe who can’t eat anything but gruel, gruel that’s hardly no different from hot water?!”

“Now, hold on, Danua. I, Elixir, understand your feelings well. But you know full well that nothing good happens when there are too many of us in one place. No, if anything, you should know that better than any of us.”

“Errm...”

“Danua, trust in Elixir. Our master may have a bit of a mouthy streak, but he has the charitable heart you so love. The true calling of a tool is to serve a good master, and surely a man with a charitable heart will not do any harm to the hungry.” Elixir says soothingly, calming the vehemently protesting Danua. She quickly takes Danua from no compromises to compromising.

In truth, trying to take Noah home with them would likely end in war.

“We will make certain that Noah will choose a master of her own free will, so do not worry yourself. You may trade letters if you wish, and even visit from time to time. The countries are not so large, and as they’re right next to one another, no doubt you can walk the distance every once in a

while," Elixir continues, charging on ahead, but no one objects to her proposal.

The truth is, Noah's conditions for use are quite lax. Perhaps it goes without saying, as her purpose is to collect the powerless masses and bear them until the disaster passes, but as Noah accepts people who don't want to die as her masters, she's essentially usable by anyone. Further, there are countless people in the Arcana Kingdom. Even if the King can't make use of her, someone else can.

"…I'll at least be here till she wakes up. You can allow that at least, right?"

"Yes, good, good. So that's how it'll be, my master."

"Alright, thanks. Sorry to leave you to do it all."

It's a perfectly acceptable solution as far as Ukyou's concerned. Based on the King's expression, he seems to have no issue with it, either.

"Hahahah! My master, you are a man who became a king! In which case, it's upon you to be confident! And I am a chalice, so leave it to me to help untangle the webs between people!"

"You really are oddly good with people. Maybe I should leave diplomacy to you… Wait, without Elixir I'd probably end up dead."

"Oh, it was just a matter of converging interests, so it's not any real feat of negotiation. Danua is a dedicated silo, so she will nod her head when someone needs her, and she doesn't like conflict, so she is amenable to persuasion. Of course, that is why she doesn't get along very well with the average Sacred Treasure."

At the very least, the looks from the other Sacred Treasure are less than friendly. They must believe they need to deny her legitimacy given that she, in a sense, has moved beyond her role as a tool, of her purpose being the same as her functions.

"We have gained a Sacred Treasure unexpectedly… Eckesachs. Would you mind explaining Noah's functions?"

Having essentially been given the right to make use of one of the Sacred Treasures, the King manages to ask this, despite his confusion. A flying ship in and of itself is extremely useful, but he needs to confirm the details.

"She's tough and can fly. No other features to speak of. She cannot fly all that fast, either, but combined with that stick over there, you should be able to move relatively quickly," Eckesachs explains, throwing in a barb in the process.

"I'm not a stick!" Vajra replies angrily.

"Then go turn into a spear next to the half-destroyed Noah," Eckesachs retorts, rather coolly.

"…I refuse."

Vajra subtly tries to position herself so that she and Noah aren't in the same field of view. It seems she doesn't like dealing with Sacred Treasures larger than she is.

“As Danua noted earlier, it’s a ship that won’t break unless you use me. Suiboku did, in fact, destroy her at one point.”

“Another thing about my Master I didn’t know…”

Sansui finds it refreshing to learn bits and pieces of the man his master once was. Even if it’s not as though he’s learning everything about him, it’s still a story that Sansui couldn’t imagine his current master participating in.

“So far as I’m aware, the only ones capable of destroying her are Suiboku, while wielding myself, and that mage over there. There were a few great warriors in the past that Suiboku faced who might have been able to destroy her if she weren’t flying. They were all Rare Arts users and were extremely aggressive. Still, the only ones at present who could ever hope to destroy her so thoroughly are Suiboku, while wielding myself, and that one there.”

Hearing those words, everyone present looks to Sansui, the extremely plain swordsman. He had always praised his master, but that’s starting to seem like it’s actually grounded in reality.

“Sansui, why don’t you go back to your master and learn a flashy technique or two?”

“Lady Douve, in that case, I’m afraid I wouldn’t return during your lifetime.”

“…Your Immortal Arts are quite a bother. Can’t you just pick up a quick move or two?”

“I’m afraid not.”

If Sansui says he can’t, then it’s probably not possible. And really, if Sansui were to gain Shouzo levels of firepower, that would pretty much leave the other Houses with no recourse.

“At any rate, that is all I’m able to tell you. Surely it’s for humans to decide how to use a flying ship. Out of the Eight Sacred Treasures, I’m the only one who is purely combat-orientated, and I know little about anything else.”

To the King’s question, Eckesachs more or less only explained just how tough Noah actually is. That was it. She essentially said that Noah was effectively indestructible, but that isn’t a particularly useful piece of information.

“You should ask the rest of her directly. She’s easy enough to push into answering.”

“We appreciate it. Still, there does seem to be quite a number of uses for her. The problem is… She is not an ace, in and of herself.”

The King glances to Noah. She’s currently in pieces, but ordinarily she’s a nearly indestructible flying ship. To make the best use of this in warfare would mean...

“Thinking upon it, Lord Caputo...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“It is a problem that there is no reward for Caputo for your contributions to this war. No doubt you could make the best use of her.”

Noah is a flying ship and is equipped with powerful defenses. If Shouzo were to use her, he would literally become a strategic bomber aircraft.

“Have her decide on a master who’s someone other than Shouzo. That should solidify your position.”

Making Shouzo the wielder would create some problems on its own. After all, given his personality, he’s likely to do something reckless without thinking through the consequences.

“...Thank you. You honor us, Your Majesty.”

Part 3 — Toad

And so, the war between the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Republic came to an end. It was also safe to declare that the conflict between the old and new regimes within Domino itself was now over. Given that it had supposedly been a full-on war between two sovereign countries, it had come to an end surprisingly quickly. Of course, no one could say it had ended with little cost.

Still, the Arcana Kingdom had effectively gained all of the Eight Sacred Treasures, and had brought Domino, a country similar in size despite its depleted state, effectively under its control. No one could call it anything other than a great success, and even the birth of a superpower. With the birth of this superpower, news of its greatest assets, the aces of the Great Houses, also rang through the region.

The one that most shocked the neighboring states was, of course, the Divine Punishment, the Scarred Fool, Shouzo Kyoube, who had revealed his power to the world for the first time.

Ukyou, who had somehow acquired the Charitable Silo of Plenty, Danua, even as he lost the war, also caught the eye of his neighbors. No doubt the governments around him would continue to watch and see how he rebuilds the depleted Domino Republic.

Unfortunately for him, Saiga didn't gain all that much renown from the war. It was an understandable result, given that all he did was take out the assassins sent to the Caputo Estate.

Now, setting aside the Thinker, Shun Ukiyo, who played no part in the conflict, we're left with the Young Sword Apostle, Sansui Shirokuro. As the first of the aces, his name was already known, but this sequence of events also resulted in him being known specifically for the atrocity he committed in his master's name. While he had been known as a man with sterling character, worthy of being called an apostle of the blade, he is now also well known for being excessively loyal to the spoiled princess of House Sepaeda, infamous for her arrogance, even when compared to the members of the other Great Houses.

Ordered by the spoiled princess to 'behead them,' Sansui went ahead and chopped off all the attackers' heads and, almost as though to provide proof of his actions, had them gibbeted near the kingdom's capital. It was a demonstration of what would happen to those who defied House Sepaeda. Not a message to the enemy, but to Arcana's people. Whether or not they'd actually believe that Sansui killed all of them by beheading them on the battlefield, it was more than enough to show just how far House Sepaeda was willing to go against their enemies.

"Hehehe...looks like fun."

At the very least, everyone understood now that the most influential members of House Sepaeda fully backed Sansui Shirokuro. His troubles

thus come to an abrupt end and Sansui returns to his unchanging daily routine. The practice swings he'd done for five hundred years in the deep woods, copying his master, continue into his life in the mortal world. As the sun rises to light Douve's estate, he's standing outside, quietly swinging his sword.

Even the most charitable observer wouldn't call his expression happy. While he used to receive expressions of respect or hostility, recently those have been augmented by terror, and curiosity from those seeking to catch a glimpse of something terrifying. This is all due to the gibbeting, of course. He certainly regrets having made his careless remark, but the problem probably extends back to even earlier, when he so loyally went to the trouble of beheading everything. Subjecting those corpses to such humiliation was an inhuman thing to do, according to Sansui's values.

He knew full well that he had engaged in atrocious behavior, even if it was at the command of another, and now that his behavior was well known, he had earned a reputation as an inhuman butcher. If he hadn't felt even a little self-hatred after all that, there would have been a serious problem with his character as a human being.

"Sigh..."

Even as his mood sinks, his practice swings remain impeccable. While the whole issue does depress him, he understands that it's not a particularly serious problem. The issues surrounding the origin of his adopted daughter, Lain, have been almost entirely taken care of. If they were still an issue, he wouldn't be indulging in practice swings.

Sansui is thus completely satisfied with the political solution. The important thing is that Lain is healthy and happy, and that she might have to engage in a marriage of political convenience is a minor issue. At the very least, it's nothing compared to the fact that they've avoided the worst possible case of a sovereign ruler, one who owns Elixir and Dainsleif, coming after her.

That Sansui, the Apostle of the Sword, is rumored to be a ruthless individual, willing to go to inhuman extremes, is an even less important issue. It's not like he wanted to be a holy man, or even really the Apostle of the Sword. Well, perhaps it's not entirely unimportant. It's one thing for Sansui to be viewed that way, after all, but it's another thing entirely for his daughter Lain to be viewed in the same light.

"...Still not a great feeling."

When he's honest about it, he doesn't like it much. Even if he did in fact behead them, it's still unpleasant to think of having their heads lined up for display like that. Sansui himself isn't enjoying being the target of all these rumors, even without any of it involving Lain. He can't bring himself to blame this on Douve, who ordered the beheadings, or Lord Sepaeda, who carried out the gibbeting.

He's thought it before several times, but focusing so intently on beheading his opponents in combat had been, in itself, a wasteful

distraction, and he'd had no need to actually demonstrate that wastefulness. He should have just disposed of them cleanly. Sure, he probably would have been lectured over it, but it would have all ended there. Even Douve probably wouldn't have punished him for killing the enemy without beheading them.

"Tsk. I should've known better."

He should have been able to see this coming. After all, this is what it means to make a reputation for yourself as a swordsman in the mortal world. Since all this had come about from acting in accordance with his employer's wishes, he just needed to accept it and move on. To let this bother him this much simply meant that he hadn't thought it through sufficiently. Essentially, it means Sansui himself still has much to learn. Making a note of this to himself, Sansui then stops his practice swings.

"There."

He lowers his wooden sword, but doesn't put it back in his sash, turning his body toward a particular direction. A heartbeat later, an intense hostility washes over Sansui.

"No intention of hiding your intent, I see. It doesn't take an Immortal to notice this amount of raw aggression channeled right at me."

Still, Sansui shows no sign of being affected, appearing entirely calm.

"Frankly, seeing you at a distance was a disappointment. You look too plain for a man who lined up all those heads. Didn't seem much different from the old men back home. Seems that you're just an ordinary man."

It's not a front; he really isn't bothered by it. Grasping that, the members of the group that appear in front of Sansui all smile.

"So, you're the reaper. I thought you'd be taller."

Standing in front of Sansui are five young women. They're each wearing different outfits, but each set of garb is clearly intended for use in martial arts, similar to Sansui's kimono. The common thread uniting all of them is that they're unarmed.

"The reaper? Me, I suppose?"

"Don't play dumb. We saw what you did."

The young women appear to be preparing to challenge Sansui here and now. They aren't here to schedule a duel for later, but to kick things off immediately. Though none of them have weapons, Sansui himself is hardly well armed, either, but at least he's got a wooden sword. It's a little underwhelming as weapons go, but it's still more than enough to kill an opponent. In spite of that, Sansui doesn't let down his guard.

They all have different auras, ones I've never felt before.

There's a good reason he can't let his guard down. While there are five of them, one in particular has a much more impressive aura than the rest. The other four aren't simply small by comparison; rather, the difference is large enough that one could very well lose sight of them entirely in her shadow.

“We saw what you did with your so-called gibbeting. You did all that yourself, didn’t you? It’s no exaggeration to call you the reaper.”

The only one speaking is the one with the overwhelming aura. She’s also the one directing all that hostility in Sansui’s direction.

“Assuming it isn’t all a giant lie…”

Long silver hair that ripples despite the lack of wind… The hair leaves an overwhelmingly strong impression from this young woman just out of adolescence. Her expression is like that of a beast, one thirsty for blood.

The silver-haired woman drops down low, balling her hands into fists. Sansui answers by taking a middle stance.

“I’m not an entertaining man, but I do try to grasp what others want of me.”

He doesn’t need to read her aura to know what she wants.

“I see, I see… I’m glad to hear that. I was worried you’d launch into some lecture, like an old fossil.”

“Lectures are for after the fight, not before.”

“Hrmph… I suppose this sort of composure is to be expected from this kingdom’s greatest warrior.”

The silver-haired woman appears to be the only one who will actually face Sansui directly. The other four don’t so much as move a step, watching over the duel with expressions confident of victory.

“But will you be able to maintain that composure in the face of death?!”

The distance between Sansui and the girl is more than enough to make conversation a bit difficult.

The silver-haired woman begins running, easily covering that distance.

She’s fast… A Rare Art focused on physical enhancement, it seems.

Sansui locks eyes with the silver-haired girl just as she strikes with her hardened fist. Despite her speed, she’s clearly in control of her movements, while Sansui has already finished reading her intentions.

But that’s not all it is. Her movements are well coordinated. Much different from Saiga.

Sansui steps off to the side just before the woman dashes forward, dodging her attack. Throughout this entire process, Sansui continues his observations.

She’s not just enhancing her physical abilities, but her senses, too.

The woman doesn’t appear remotely surprised that Sansui avoided her attack. Passing by Sansui like an arrow in flight, she once again opens up distance from Sansui and turns around to face him.

“You avoided that perfectly! Hahaha, that’s what I was hoping for!”

He dodged, not from reflex, but after having read her movements completely. The silver-haired woman is laughing precisely because she understands this. Yet, even then, she’s fully confident in her victory.

It’s not just her. The four members of her retinue retain their composure as well.

“But it looks like avoiding my attacks is the best you can do. Which is why, despite knowing exactly what I was doing, you weren’t able to attack me!”

Even as the silver-haired woman confidently asserts her superiority, Sansui turns toward her wordlessly. He maintains his middle stance, showing no sign of fear or of getting lost in the intensity of the battle.

“You’re slow! Even if you can read my moves, your body won’t keep up!”

Her observations are correct. Sansui once used a thrust from his wooden sword against an attack from Saiga while the latter was enhanced by Spirit Summoning. But he understands that trying that against the woman in front of him would just result in failure. The reason is as she said. Dodging is the most he can manage.

“You’re strong! No one had ever been able to read my movements before this! But I’m much stronger than you are!”

Sansui doesn’t deny this. Instead, he stays quiet and maintains his stance.

“Having fought you, this kingdom’s strongest, I’m now sure… That I… I’m the most powerful in the world!”

The silver-haired woman lunges again. This time, instead of trying to kill him with a single blow, she intends to close the distance and make use of a series of attacks. Thus, she will take him down with a furious rush of blows that he can’t dodge, even if he knows they’re coming. That’s the tactic she chooses.

“Flash Step.”

Sansui suddenly vanishes from her line of sight. She can’t understand what’s just happened, and she isn’t the only one. The other four girls watching the fight have also lost sight of Sansui.

“Ki Wave.”

Sansui appears right next to the silver-haired woman, grabbing her head with his left and putting her down with a Ki Wave. Still carrying his unused wooden sword, he defeats her with one hand.

“Ah…”

Losing consciousness, the silver-haired woman collapses to the ground before she realizes what’s happened.

“I can see why you were so confident.”

Looking down at her, Sansui offers his evaluation.

“You’re quite talented, I admit, but you simply lack the training to beat me,” he quietly informs his unhearing opponent.

But of course, the other four can hear what he’s saying. Even if they can’t understand the meaning of his words, they know that Sansui is still standing, while the girl they put their faith in is lying on the ground.

“…Ran!”

Someone calls the silver-haired girl by name. They all grit their teeth and fall into unarmed fighting stances.

“You won’t get away with this!”

“We’ll take you down!”

“I don’t know how you did it, but you must have cheated!”

“We gotta save Ran!”

Against these four, Sansui readies his wooden sword.

“You four are…”

Taking a stance, he quietly informs them of the reality of the situation.

“…Weak.”

The four go down easily to him.

Those were the events that transpired earlier in the morning. It wasn’t a particularly unusual incident for Sansui, and it wasn’t something worth raising a fuss about. At the very least, it wasn’t worth doing so at that moment. It’s not as though they went on a rampage, after all. All the girls had done was challenge him as warriors. Sansui isn’t so arrogant as to punish them just for that.

Sansui doesn’t bother to kill or capture the five girls, simply leaving them outside the estate. He instead makes his way to the open air training grounds near the Academy, so that he could complete his morning instruction and spar with challengers.

“My apologies to you all, but I have errands to run in the capital this afternoon. I’m afraid I won’t be able to attend the afternoon session.”

Despite his position as the instructor, Sansui has an almost obsequiously humble attitude, but no one underestimates him because of it. After all, he had just recently faced off against a large number of highly driven swordsmen with just his own sword techniques, dealing with them not only without taking an injury, but without so much as raising his heart rate. The most unusual thing about Sansui is the fact that he can stick to his ordinary self in all circumstances, regardless of who or how many he might face at once.

“I will return sometime around early evening, so if anyone needs something from me, please ask them to wait until then.”

Up to this point, it has all been routine communication. Usually this is where it ends, but Sansui has more to add today.

“This morning, a group of five young women attacked me. They were all unarmed and each users of new, hitherto unknown Rare Arts. I knocked them out, but did not restrain them, so they may soon make their way here.”

Female martial artists are by themselves a bit of an oddity, but substantially odder is the fact that each of the five practices a different, unknown Rare Art. While the term “Rare Art” is in use in the Arcana Kingdom, the reality is that mysticism and hexes were, for the longest time, the only known forms.

More recently, they've confirmed the existence of other Rare Arts, such as Magyan Spirit Summoning and Shadow Summoning, along with Sansui's Immortal Arts, but to find five more at once is a remarkable discovery.

"Four of them were moderately skilled, but there was one in particular who was extremely practiced. Whatever you do, don't offend them, and tell them to wait for me to return." he says, thus casually informing those present that, while they're not a threat to him, they are to everyone else present.

"The girl named Ran is quite strong, so please be careful."

To give such a serious warning to a group that includes incognito Royal Guardsmen... That means that she is, at the very least, stronger than a Royal Guardsman. That he was able to deal with her so easily makes those present wonder just how much further ahead Sansui is in terms of skill.

Most of those present can't offer any complaint to his words, and so they simply grit their teeth and clench their fists. Sansui doesn't seem particularly bothered by this, however, and starts making his way toward the capital.

Those remaining at the training grounds begin their afternoon lessons just as they had their morning rounds. Still, the enthusiasm among the group spans the gamut. There are those who aren't as motivated, due to Sansui's absence, while others find motivation in the fact that Sansui showed concern for them, and there are yet others who are motivated by reasons unrelated to Sansui at all.

After all, the daughter and heir of House Batterabbe is present today. Showing any lack of motivation in front of her could very well mean missing out on an opportunity that could come at any moment.

"He's just so rude! Sansui's getting a bit too full of himself, don't you think?"

Happine Batterabbe, who isn't paying those who are trying to show enthusiasm in her presence any real mind, is in a rage. This is because Sansui seems to be taking the man who is her future husband for granted.

Given that they're both aces of the Four Great Houses, it wouldn't hurt him to say he's going to leave things in Saiga's hands. Show a little confidence in his own apprentice, or something.

"I mean, come on, I bet at least half those heads were chopped off by knights of House Sepaeda!"

"That doesn't make sense, Lady Happine. Besides, even then, it would mean he beheaded over two hundred people on his own," Zuger responds, even as she slinks a bit away from Happine.

"A-Anyway! Saiga is strong, so he should go ahead and fight all those women if they show up!"

"Now, now, Happine... If they want to fight Sansui, then there's no point in me getting involved."

Saiga would like to agree with Happine, naturally. However, he thinks that not listening to Sansui would be a greater sign of his shortcomings

than anything else. Besides, it would be one thing if he was allowed to kill them, but he's not confident that he can succeed if he needs to defeat them while also holding back. He can definitely win if he uses Eckesachs, but there's a significant chance that he'd kill them in the process.

"I'm against any fighting!"

Zuger, already reserved to begin with, steps in to restrain Happine.

"I know there are times when fighting is necessary, but I don't think that's the case here!"

"Zuger, you are correct. However, there are times when one simply can't run. It would be problematic to end up cornered because one is too focused on escape," Sunae says, working to soothe Zuger's agitation.

"I suppose that's true, but..."

Even given her own personality, Zuger is still aware that there are opponents who make it difficult to avoid conflict.

"Then go and kill them to begin with! How thoughtless!" Happine says in a huff.

Kill them when you have the opportunity...well, it's a perspective, to be sure. It seemed like Sansui was regretting his choice, though. Hearing those words sends a shiver up the spines of those doing practice swings. There was nothing funny about it to them.

"Hahaha! Lady Happine, our master is a man who prefers not to kill if he can help it. That's why we respect him so."

Continuing his practice swings, Tahlan attempts to laugh it off. Has she even noticed that her logic would apply with Saiga, who was let go without being killed on three separate occasions? The only reason he's alive is because of Sansui's charity, and no one would have blamed Sansui for killing him.

"...Hm?"

Eckesachs, in her human form, senses a presence heading toward the academy. It's underlined by an enormous intensity, and lets out a voice far from human as it approaches.

"Graaaa

“Come out, Reaper!”

“C-Calm down!”

“Yes, let’s calm down!”

“Please, there are people here.”

“I understand how you feel, but... No.”

Five young women search for Sansui whilst squabbling amongst themselves.

“Oh my, are you the martial artists who Sansui mentioned?”

Hearing the voices echo into the academy itself, the academy’s highest authority, the Regent, hurriedly appears at the training grounds. The five wielders of Rare Arts mentioned by Sansui... The Regent was prepared to do anything to hang on to them.

“Where is that bastaaaaard?!”

“Now, now, calm down... How about a bit of tea? Or perhaps something to eat?”

Here, the difference in sheer experience shows itself. That or the smell of leftover lunch dishes is more than their hungry stomachs can handle. Facing the food brought by the Regent, the girls calm down and end up eating at a table set at the training grounds.

Bread and stew... The girls are drawn in by the delicious scent and begin eating. All of those present cautiously watch them eat. Meanwhile, Eckesachs appears to be carefully studying their clothing.

“More, please!”

“Yes, yes, there’s plenty for everyone.”

Wanting to feed the young is, perhaps, instinctual for the elderly. The silver-haired girl is intently shoveling food into her mouth, but from the Regent’s point of view, it’s still not all that much.

“...Thank you so much.”

“Don’t worry. It’s all leftovers, anyway.”

The Regent takes another good look at the girls. Other than Ran, they have brown hair and well-bronzed skin. She notes that this is probably less an ethnic feature than simply them being from a background that involved lots of outdoor work.

“That’s it, I must have lost because I was hungry. If I had bothered to eat, I wouldn’t have lost to that...!”

The silver hair ripples. The girl still burns with a desire to fight Sansui, hair moving on its own from her sheer intensity. By way of contrast, the other people present regard her with warm amusement. Having lost to Sansui once, she’ll keep losing to him, no matter how many times she offers up a challenge.

“Well, then, where are you all from?”

“...A hidden village separated from the rest of the world,” one of the girls answers. They avoid using any specific names, but it seems they’re residents of a secret valley.

“We’re residents of that hidden village, and for a long time we’ve avoided contact with the outside world.”

“We have spent generations practicing and passing down our own martial arts styles.”

“But we began to wonder… Perhaps our reputation of being undefeated over the last thousand years is simply because we haven’t fought anyone.”

“And then… Ran was born. The ultimate martial artist, with the same silver hair as the legendary founder of our village.”

Perhaps content for now, the silver-haired girl, Ran, stops eating. She began to voice her dreams. Her gaze speaks of an unending ambition.

“I was born in a hidden village touting itself as undefeated for the last thousand years. I was born with ultimate strength, despite not having learned any of the traditional arts. There is no one left in that village who can defeat me. That is why I left the village.”

She has a shining dream that won’t be derailed by a single defeat, and it seems the other four believe in that dream as well.

“I’m going to be the strongest in the world. I’m going to prove that I’m the greatest warrior in this great big world!”

“Are you dense? The five of you already lost to Sansui,” Happine says rather coolly.

The reality is that the fight with Sansui proved that Ran isn’t the strongest. Still, Ran smiles, confident of victory.

“If I fight him again, I can definitely beat him. I’ll make him regret not killing me…”

“That’s right! Ran is a powerful martial artist, one who even the four of us together can’t beat.”

“If she can fight him again, she’ll definitely overtake him.”

“Ran, the ultimate martial artist, is the very reason for our village’s existence.”

“She’s the result of generations of effort to surpass human limitations.”

All five of them are confident of victory in the next encounter.

It’s then that Eckesachs asks her question, something that she needs to confirm with them.

“You five… Are you from Tempera Village?”

Hearing those words, the five freeze and look to Eckesachs. Having said the name aloud, one that no one else had heard of, Eckesachs nods to herself.

“As I thought… So, the survivors of that village rebuilt it.”

“What are you talking about, Eckesachs?”

“My Master, the Tempera Village was a hidden village that had built up a reputation as being the collection of the most powerful martial artists in the region about two thousand years ago. They had many bloodlines with talents for different Rare Arts, and they developed martial arts to take advantage of those talents. The local word was to avoid making trouble with Tempera’s martial artists.”

The sword, several thousand years old herself, begins reminiscing and nodding to herself. Hearing the words ‘two thousand years ago,’ many of those present could easily figure out what was going to come next.

“So, my then-wielder went to the village and fought the heads of the various arts. Of course, he won, but they were angry… Many of the residents refused to let him go and attacked him and, of course, he simply defeated them, as well. We never stopped in that land again. But, to imagine that village would produce a Marked…”

Residents of the village proudly proclaiming a thousand years of being undefeated… The shocking truth they’re told is that their village was once nearly wiped out more than a thousand years ago. Well, it’s not exactly a lie to say that they’ve been undefeated for a thousand years if their last defeat happened over a thousand years ago.

“That girl is Marked?!”

“I see, it’s as the legends say…”

Sunae and Tahlan stare at Eckesachs in surprise. They hadn’t reacted to the name of Tempera, but they seem familiar with the concept of a Marked. They swallow and regard Ran warily.

“Marked? What’s that?”

With very little knowledge of this world, Saiga decides to just ask Eckesachs. But it seems the Arcanians and the five from the Tempera Village haven’t heard of the term ‘Marked,’ either. Many of those present turn their attention to Eckesachs, Ran herself included.

“In this part of the world they’re called berserkers, I believe. Essentially, they’re a Rare Art user, and a natural-born one at that.”

Eckesachs has an enormous amount of combat experience, and as such knows quite a lot about most related subjects. As a highly excited Regent takes notes, she continues to explain to the silver-haired woman herself.

“Like the other Rare Arts, once out of every thousand births or so, there are those born with a power known as the ‘wicked blood.’ Now, not all of them become Marked. Only the most powerful of those with ‘wicked blood’ eventually develop that power without instruction from anyone else.”

House Caputo’s ace, Shouzo Kyoube… When he decided to use magic, he could use it instantly, despite his lack of instruction. While there’s a difference in magnitude, those with extremely powerful gifts are able to naturally manifest their powers from time to time. A Marked refers to the state that the excessively gifted among the wicked-blooded manifest.

“When one’s talent with the ‘wicked blood’ is too strong, they become extremely sensitive to challenges, remain in a constant state of excitement, and continue fighting on the battlefield until they expire. This is why they are known as the Marked, or berserkers.”

Hearing those words, the Regent couldn’t hide her excitement. There’s a berserker right out of the legends in front of her! This was something to celebrate.

“Oh, my, and her hair is silver, just like the legends say.”

“Indeed. In essence, she’s simply a wielder of a Rare Art. It’s not that she’s something superhuman. There are a fair number of them outside of the Tempera Village. They’re just rare.”

Hearing those words, the five are shown just how little they know of the outside world.

“Within a large population, there’s a higher chance of a Marked being born. The reason the Marked aren’t known in the Tempera Village must be because none were born there, probably due to their small population, and because none of the stories came to them from the outside.”

Part 4 — Divine Beast

“Y-You must be mistaken!”

The miracle of Tempera Village, a sudden evolutionary jump ahead... Those who believe Ran is the first of her kind in history can’t accept that she’s just an example of a rare but well-known phenomenon. They stop eating and protest fiercely.

“You decimated Tempera Village? How can we believe that?!”

“Then allow me to name your schools. Bursting Venom Style, using Seeping Blood; Drunken Fist Style, using Inebriated Blood; Four Vessels Style, using Orb Blood; and Mist Shadow Style, using Illusion Blood. Am I wrong? I suppose that after two thousand years the names might be different, but based on your attire and body types, it seems the foundations are the same.”

Hearing Eckesachs so easily name their schools, the four freeze. Putting aside the truth of her story, she definitely knows about the Temperans.

“Oh, so, they’re weak, then? Neither berserkers and the martial artists of the Tempera Village are much to write home about, I guess.”

“Don’t be absurd. Of course they’re not weak,” Eckesachs says, rolling her eyes at Happine’s thoughtless remark. That said, just because they can use a Rare Art and have learned its techniques, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re strong. Eckesachs’ information is from two millennia ago, after all.

However, Sansui himself noted their strength after fighting them earlier. At the very least, they’ve achieved a certain level of skill. In particular, the Marked known as Ran is dangerous. Her silver hair, rippling and shimmering as though aflame, is a symbol of overflowing vitality.

“Sansui was right to warn you against fighting her. You could very well have ended up dying.”

Opponents who Sansui and Suiboku fought and defeated... Having heard that, everyone, the girls from the Tempera Village included, were treating the situation far too lightly. No longer a group wielding unknown arts, they’re a known quantity, who have already lost to people they know. Still, they remain a group that Sansui has acknowledged as strong.

“He isn’t here at the moment. He’ll return in the evening. Do you plan to wait?”

“Of course we’ll wait... But having been so thoroughly insulted, do you think I’ll just sit around while waiting?”

She’s been told that the idea that she’s the result of generations of struggle in their hidden village is simply a misunderstanding. She’s been told that she’s simply a product of chance. Talented, yes, but a well-known quantity in the history of the wider world.

“Hardly admirable, having that attitude after being so thoroughly beaten… No doubt you’re well aware that if Sansui intended to take off your heads, you’d all be dead.”

All five of them had been knocked unconscious. That’s an unalterable fact. They didn’t really survive; they were just allowed to live. They’re not survivors, just recipients of charity. In the face of a truth that many of those present have experienced themselves, the girls remain defiant.

“But we’re alive!”

Despite all of that, though, they’re undeniably still alive. That means that they haven’t yet lost. In that respect, they’re of a mindset that Eckesachs herself is rather fond of.

“I suppose that’s one way of thinking… Sunae, this is a good opportunity for you.”

“I must say, I agree. Indeed, if the opponent is Marked, fighting her is my duty as a Spirit Summoner.”

Though unaware of the other four styles, Sunae is familiar with the Marked. Though not driven by bloodlust, she’s still overflowing with aggression, and faces off with the silver-haired demon with an air of one fulfilling her duty.

“If you’ve had time to digest, fight me. Let me teach you who it is that has truly surpassed the limits of what it means to be human.”

“…With pleasure!”

Evidently having eaten enough to be sated for the time being, Ran quickly hops onto her feet. She then drops into a stance, ensuring a substantial distance between herself and her opponent on the wide plain. Saiga is torn as he watches this unfold. It’s not that he wants to fight, but he’s not pleased that Sunae is asked to fight rather than him doing it himself.

The same is true of Happine, who puts voice to her displeasure.

“Say… Eckesachs. You know Sunae wasn’t able to beat Saiga, right? Why are you pitting that Sunae against the berserker?”

Berserkers… There aren’t many who know the details of what exactly they are. The legends around them are well-known because of their spectacular nature, but the principles that underlie their nature are only speculated as some kind of Rare Art, nothing more. Eckesachs is probably the first one to ever confirm the mechanics underlying the legend.

“Because she can definitely win. Frankly, a Marked can’t possibly defeat a Spirit Summoner.”

“That’s correct. As Sunae noted, fighting the Marked is the duty of those who wield Spirit Summoning,” Tahlan says, in support of Eckesachs’s observation. The prince, who is known as his kingdom’s greatest swordsman and a master of Shadow Summoning, looks on wistfully as his younger sister prepares to fight.

“It’ll be fine… There’s no way Ran will lose…” the four girls from the Tempera Village say to themselves, as though trying to shore up their

faltering faith. There's one truth they know: That there is no one in Tempera Village who can match her. Indeed, even when all of the skilled masters in the village got together, they couldn't put up a real fight against her.

Ran is the greatest warrior in the world. The four girls still cling desperately to that illusion.

"You're not going to use a weapon?"

"I will not. Those who are to inherit the crown of Magyan fight with tooth and claw."

Ran and Sunae... Both of them are agitating to fight and both are certain of victory. This, despite knowing that their opponent is strong. Moreover, neither has an inkling of doubt that they'll end up as the victor. It's impossible to tell which one is right. There are things that must happen to know the outcome, and no doubt neither will be satisfied without an actual battle. However, there are things here that are already clear.

"...I know that gaze. The gaze of the arrogant who underestimate me. I've brought down everyone who's ever looked at me that way. Doing so is what brings me joy!"

"I know your gaze, too. The gaze of an overconfident young girl, with blind confidence in her strength."

"Hehehe... You even say the same things as the others! Now, let me prove you wrong! Just as I've done with all the others before you!"

Ran doesn't know Sunae, nor does Sunae know Ran. However, Ran is ignorant of Spirit Summoning, while Sunae is acquainted with the Marked.

"O Great Lion, Guardian of our Royal House, impose your presence upon this world, with my body as your vessel!"

Spirit Summoning, the Rare Art wielded by those with the Royal Presence... With the activation of her Art, Sunae transforms into a giant lion. From two legs to four legs, from the form of a human to the form of a lion. A giant lioness that's so tall that one would have to crane their neck to look up at her. Having seen this for the first time, the four girls from the Tempera Village stare in open-mouthed shock.

"Fwahahahahaha! I see, I see! So that's your power! Your martial art!"

But Ran is unfazed. She dashes forward at a tremendous pace, as though saying Sunae's just made herself a bigger target. Her speed is such that even the Arcanians, who've almost grown accustomed to the speed of Sansui's Flash Step, are caught by surprise.

"But the bigger you are, the more fun you are to clobber!"

There's simple logic behind rapid movement, and their master has repeatedly hammered home just how important it is when fighting against a group. Her ability to move quickly...they understand her strength just from seeing that.

"No caution... Reckless!"

With her body protected by fur, Sunae also dashes forward without hesitation. Her speed, combined with the sheer size of her body, makes her

appear even faster than Ran. But Ran understands Sunae's vulnerabilities with the merest glance.

"Hahah! You're as dumb as a beast!"

It's no illusion; she's actually grown larger. With this knowledge, the large body itself becomes a fatal flaw. There's no doubt that being able to move quickly with that large form is a sign of strength. However, a large body means a heavy body, and when heavy objects move quickly, they're not capable of rapid changes in direction. Even if Ran's opponent is quicker, she can still follow her movements, which means the difference in speed isn't really an issue.

The giant lioness attempts to claw Ran apart with her paw. After easily avoiding this attack, she ducks under the arm and lands a punch into Sunae's torso.

"Hah! The old men in the village were more entertaining than this!"

Ran puts her entire weight behind the punch; moving at top speed, she lands the punch on a weak point, like a counterpunch. She feels the blow land and is sure she's beaten her opponent. Ran is convinced that she'd won.

"...I see."

In spite of this, Sunae sweeps her forelegs, dropping her below her own stomach.

"Don't think that you've won, Marked one. Don't presume to think of Spirit Summoning as though you are dealing with humans or with beasts."

"Grr... Hahahahaha!"

The sweeping blow takes a good chunk off of Ran's body. She lies there with her skin in tatters, flesh torn and bone showing from her wounds, bleeding onto the plain. Seeing her, most of the observers think the match is over.

But the four from the Tempera Village are different. They have faith that victory would arrive, so long as that mad laugh continues to ring out.

"To take one of my blows directly and not only still stand, but attack me in turn! Amusing... How fun!"

"Ah, so, you are as mad as the legends say."

It wasn't madness triggered by the approach of death, of course. Ran's body repairs itself in seconds. The skin, the flesh, the blood...all of it returns to normal. Only her tattered clothing remains as a testament to her previous injuries.

"Hahaha! Did you think you could beat me so easily?!"

"Hrmph... Then I'll play with you a bit longer."

The fighting ultimately looked inconclusive. With greater raw speed and defense, Sunae could still attack her opponent even while taking blows, while Ran, with her agility and healing speed, keeps landing full strength blows of her own. The fight appears to be without end.

"...Sunae."

Watching the fight, Tahlan is struck by the power of Spirit Summoning. He sees the sheer strength in the power that he can never use himself.

“It’s over...Ran’s won this.”

The four girls from the Tempera Village, on the other hand, are confident that the match has now settled into a pattern leading to victory. In the fight this morning, Ran lost consciousness from a single blow, but things are different now. Even as she takes her opponent’s blows, she’s staying conscious. In that case, there’s no way their symbol of hope can possibly lose.

“W-What’s with that person...?! She’s laughing while getting all bloodied!”

Zuger is on the verge of tears. There’s likely no form of torture or execution that comes with as much pain as is being inflicted on Ran in this match. Even taking into account her healing abilities, it’s impossible to understand how she can keep laughing and continue a battle that is a constant stream of agonizing pain. Further, this is just a random fight, with nothing else on the line. To Zuger, it beggars belief.

“Wait, aren’t things pretty bad for her right now? I mean, even if she’s bigger and tougher, if she keeps getting hit like that...”

Happine also appears to be getting worried. She knows the properties of Spirit Summoning. Even if it enhances the user’s physical abilities, it doesn’t heal their body. She’s also heard that when it comes to their own bodies, the Marked have healing even superior to the Mystic Arts. In her view, this constant exchange of blows seems disadvantageous to Sunae.

“...When looking at the raw mechanics behind the Marked, the effects manifest as pure enhancement of physical abilities. This is bothersome, as it also improves reflexes and concentration, making them extremely good at evading attacks.”

Even from Eckesachs’s point of view, with her knowledge backed with plentiful experience, the idea that Ran couldn’t lose if she could fight someone a second time is true, to a certain extent. With their lack of fear, the Marked can observe their opponent’s actions, identify techniques and movements, and figure out countermeasures. It’s natural to think that a longer fight would be to Ran’s advantage.

“Read the enemy’s movements and attack in a way they can’t counter... That’s how the Marked fight.”

However, Eckesachs remains calm. She had already determined that a fight between a Spirit Summoner and Marked would go this way.

“They know neither fear nor fatigue, they become stronger the more they fight, and they use these advantages to overcome their enemies. In a battle between two humans, there’s likely few opponents as bothersome. But...that’s limited to battles between humans.”

“Yes, that’s correct. In our recorded history, there’s not a single instance of a Marked defeating a Spirit Summoner,” Tahlan says, confirming Eckesachs’s observation. Frankly, the outcome of this fight was never in

doubt. The match-up was simply far too tilted in Sunae's favor, especially since she's also been taught specifically how to deal with the Marked.

"With their regeneration abilities and learning abilities, they can certainly adapt to an opponent's moves. That's true. It's not an exaggeration to say that the Marked become stronger the more they fight. However, that only means they get better at reading their opponent's moves."

It's an extremely bloody battle, but Eckesachs is completely unfazed. Because she foresaw the results, because she knew this is how it would go, there's nothing for her to feel as it goes exactly as she expected.

Becoming stronger in this case means optimization: using the minimum needed movement to avoid the opponent's attack and landing the strongest possible counter-attack on the enemy. This is the strength common to all Marked, not just Ran. However, that's all it is.

"Allow me to be blunt. If things continue in this way, your side will lose. She'll exhaust herself first."

"Y-You're lying! There's no way Ran will lose!"

It's only natural that the four martial artists would protest Tahlan's declaration. There's no apparent change in the fight between the two. They keep trading blows. It's hard to imagine that one side is losing given the current situation.

"That girl is certainly strong. After all, the Marked only appear from the most talented of those with the Tainted Blood. She has a once-in-several-generations kind of talent. By way of contrast, and compared to most Spirit Summoners, Sunae's talents aren't extraordinary. She does have the Royal Presence, but it's not as though she's particularly talented with it."

One intensely gifted with the Tainted Blood, and an ordinary possessor of the Royal Presence. What lies beyond a clash between these two is a single inevitable result.

"But... Talent alone decides nothing, in and of itself."

An unending exchange of blows... The fight appears unchanging. However, a change slowly becomes apparent in Ran: her rippling silver hair is slowly turning brown.

"To put it simply, while the Marked can increase their physical abilities, there's an upper limit to how much they can strengthen themselves. No matter how long a battle lasts, their actual physical strength doesn't increase. And, of course, neither does their weight."

The logic is simple. What's the most powerful blow possible? It comes from moving at top speed, with all of one's weight behind it, aimed at a single point. It would be different if she had a special technique, like a Ki Wave, but all Ran can do is hit hard. There's nothing beyond that. As such, she simply doesn't have the firepower to take down a Spirit Summoner.

"Spirit Summoners still have weak points, of course. If she can hit them precisely, she still has a chance at turning the tide. But no matter how quickly and accurately a Marked can move, the opponent is a giant beast,

and one who retains their rational mind. Of course they wouldn't let them just land a blow directly on a weak point."

Placing a full-strength blow with all their weight behind it precisely into a vulnerable point... As the Marked also enhance their reflexes, no doubt that this is possible against a human. However, Spirit Summoners also strengthen their reflexes. They may not be able to avoid the attack, but they can shift enough to avoid taking the hit directly on a vulnerable spot.

"And even if she has a greater affinity for the Tainted Blood, it's still within reasonable limits. It's not as though she's completely beyond reason like House Caputo's ace. It's one thing to continue boosting her physical abilities, but if she keeps taking blows from the Spirit Summoner... The amount of energy she expends in healing becomes enormous."

Of course, if the Marked wishes to, they could probably defend against blows from a Spirit Summoner. However, if it's timed for right after they've landed a full-strength attack, even if they know the counterattack is coming, they can't avoid it. As warriors driven by battle frenzy, the Marked get lost in their focus on attacking and lose sight of that fact.

"Ordinarily, maintaining the form of a giant beast is a burden of its own, so the Spirit Summoner must contend with their limits. In that sense, the Marked are better in an endurance battle. If a Marked emphasizes their agility and focuses on evasion, then they probably shouldn't lose, by the numbers. However, because they're driven to throw aside any regard for their own safety to attack and attack..."

Two young women clash, inflicting pain on one another. The one who falls first is not the weaker one, but the one who made a costly mistake. She collapses as her hair, silver since the day she was born, turns to its natural brown.

Feeling fatigue and suffering for the first time in her life, Ran sees just how much larger the world is than she imagined, as she slams into the wall of her own limits.

Part 5 — Meaning

It was a fun experience, though. To Ran, the world had been a boring, colorless place. To her, the battles that unfolded in front of her eyes appeared to be in slow motion. As one of the Marked, she could not understand why the fights unfolded the way they did.

Why that particular move for that particular moment? Why won't they move to take advantage of opportunities? Why don't they notice patterns in their opponents' movements? It's not that she trained to achieve those insights; she was born with them, which is why her perspective was always different from those of her peers'.

She was special. None of the martial arts developed over several thousand years in the hidden village were able to cope with her power. Everyone in the village feared her. She had appeared as though by the fickle whim of God, proving in an instant that all of their training was ultimately meaningless.

So she sought out what lay outside. In search of new experiences, she had jumped out into the wider world that lay beyond the hidden village. And it was out there that she heard a particular rumor: evidently, there's an extremely powerful man in the Arcana Kingdom.

"Raaaaaaaaaah!"

She was made aware of just how large the world outside really is, and that there are those in this world who can withstand her fists.

"Graaaaaah!"

That there were opponents who could knock her out in a single blow… Now she knows that this world is wonderful, that it can be entertaining.

"Raah… Ah, ahh…?"

While caught up in her own excitement, she finally ran out of steam, before she could even realize that the price for escaping the monotony of life in a cloistered world was the loss of her self-confidence, her self-worth, as the most powerful person in the world. No longer able to heal her own wounds, Ran was instead healed by a mystic brought for that purpose.

The four girls from Tempera, after seeing Ran flame out, were shocked into silence. True, they had left the village to see the wider world. They'd thought that there were many enemies yet unimagined in the world that awaited them. Still, they hadn't expected to lose this quickly. It hadn't even been a year since they'd left the village, and already they'd hit their limits.

The person they'd believed in crumbles before them. The sudden and complete sense of loss they suffer leaves them standing numbly in shock. She, who had so thoroughly dominated the martial artists from the Tempera Village, the arts that had sustained a thousand years of invincibility, was nowhere near the most powerful in this wider world. In which case, just what had their ancestors actually done with their time?

"Hey Eckesachs. The world certainly is large, isn't it?"

Seeing those four, the legendary sword recalled words from the past. She remembered the man who had been born in this great wide world, lived a long time, obtained strength without rival, saw the entirety of the supposedly wide world, could not give up as old age simply wouldn't claim him, and ultimately could no longer find anyone to compete with.

"My Master, you should go to Sunae."

"A-Alright."

Saiga, who was capable of wielding Spirit Summoning but had yet to achieve the ability to turn into a giant beast, ran toward Sunae, who had finished her battle.

"Everything alright, Sunae?"

"Yes... She was strong. Still, she was no match for Spirit Summoning."

Though she had emerged victorious, the long time spent in giant beast form had taken its toll on the exhausted Sunae, and her body was covered in bruises. Sunae didn't bother with any posturing; instead, she leaned against Saiga and accepted his affection.

"I certainly couldn't lose with my brother watching."

Spirit Summoning needed to establish itself as the strongest, but she was also aware that its dominance was an illusion. There were simply far too many opponents she couldn't beat in the Arcana Kingdom. Yet, in spite of that, Spirit Summoning needed to be the strongest. Particularly in front of her brother, who, despite viewing it as a divine Art, was unable to wield it himself.

"So how about it? Your future wife is quite a sight to behold, no?"

"Yeah. So much so that I was almost jealous."

"I see! Well, I didn't think it would feel this good!"

Sunae, with Saiga's support, headed over to the other mystic. With bruises all over her body, she, too, needed healing.

"Mmmph... They're getting all sweet and cuddly... But it's a bit hard to cut in."

"Now, now."

For Happine, all of this was rather frustrating. She can't help but feel that she's been relegated to the background, as of late. Zuger, in turn, somehow managed to calm the irate Happine.

"Actually, Eckesachs, I wanted to ask. What would have happened if Saiga had done the fighting?"

"Mm? It wouldn't have been particularly interesting."

The simple reality was that mystic walls and armor were more durable than the body obtained through Spirit Summoning. That was obvious from comparing what happened when they were hit by magic. Meaning, putting aside Eckesachs, so long as he protected himself with mystical armor, Saiga wouldn't have been injured at all. But, not being able to use Spirit Summoning in public, he also lacked a useful means of attack.

Of course, if he used his divination, he could read his opponent's movements. But, as Sansui proved, opponents who can react after seeing their opponent move can move faster than divination can account for.

Still, if Saiga was to remove the limitations on his magic, he would most definitely win. Even with his basic Spirit Summoning, if Saiga combined that with the enhancement provided by Eckesachs, he wouldn't lose to Ran in the realm of speed. After that, the attack power of his fire magic would be enough to break through the regeneration abilities of the Marked.

"With my presence, no doubt he wouldn't lose, but I doubt that would mean he'd win, either."

Saiga was able to defeat Sunae before acquiring Eckesachs because she couldn't completely avoid his fire magic spells. Combined with his wearing mystical armor, she couldn't land an effective blow on him.

"...It can't be."

It had taken this long for the four martial artists from the Tempera Village to regain the ability to speak. It was an extremely easy to understand defeat, and one so total that everyone who saw it knew who had won. Sunae's Spirit Summoning had been so flashy that the four from the Tempera Village had completely understood what they were seeing. No matter how many times Ran refought that battle, she couldn't possibly win.

"No doubt dealing with a Marked using the arts of the Tempera Village would be difficult. It's easy enough to remember techniques if they follow a specific form, and from there it'd just be a matter of making adjustments to beat people... It's the perfect environment for a Marked to show their dominance."

The answer to the question of whether the Marked were weak or strong had a simple answer. They were so strong that Eckesachs would vouch for their strength. They were particularly strong against those who fight with unarmed martial arts. Since Ran was simply superhuman in her physical abilities, it was difficult to compete with her using what were literally human techniques.

"To add a bit more to the discussion...as those who are here are aware, an individual's strength and their group's strength aren't always in alignment. Taking down a single opponent with a group is something that requires training in its own right."

The Royal Guardsmen present all understand that fact. There is a substantial difference between the training required for fighting in a group versus fighting as an individual. Even if there was a group that had mastered the art of unarmed fighting in a secluded location, that fact alone would likely have meant that they hadn't done any work on attacking a single opponent en masse.

"The Marked are likely invincible within Tempera Village, but that's definitely not true now that she's left the village. Whether you consider that a good or bad thing... Well, that is not up to Ran, but to you four."

The ultimate legendary sword knew the emptiness of seeking to be the strongest. As the Demon Blade of Vengeance foretold, all that results from trying to prove one is the strongest is tragedy. If they are simply ignorant of the world, they end up collapsed on the ground, and if they truly end up the strongest, they cease to belong anywhere.

“Once the Marked regains consciousness, she will likely seek another battle. If Sansui returns with orders to kill her from his master, then you have nothing to do but give up on everything.”

“That would be a problem!”

Marked were definitely strong, but they were no match for Sansui.

The only reason Ran, who sought out battle, survived this long was because she simply hadn’t fought anyone stronger than she was. When she fights someone against whom her strength is ineffective, Ran is little better than an untrained goon.

“I don’t suppose there’s a solution…”

The Regent is the one who would find that a problem. At the very least, a living Marked was a valuable specimen, and she wished to avoid letting the other Rare Art users out of her grasp.

“With Sansui about, we could take care of things without much fuss.”

Sansui was able to knock Ran out with a single blow. That fact alone meant there was no issue with her living here. Of course, the burden on Sansui wasn’t a consideration.

“You say that, but he’s the spoiled princess’s lackey. If she says to kill her, then that’s the end of it,” Saiga said, remembering Happine’s comment. Neither Douve nor Lord Sepaeda would order an unjust killing, but they’d also have no compunction against ordering a killing if they felt it necessary.

While Sansui wouldn’t go to the trouble of killing an opponent that came after him, if ordered to do so by Douve, he likely wouldn’t hesitate.

“A good point…”

The Marked, also known as berserkers, really don’t live long. Just as was showcased earlier, because they don’t know their own limits, they eventually run out of energy while fighting on the battlefield and thus expire. Further, if Sansui wanted to kill her, she’d be dead. That is something entirely unavoidable. The Regent struggled with her quandary, but the four martial artists were struggling even more.

“This is… Our limit…”

“What are we to do…”

“Do we return to the village?”

“We can hardly go back now…”

Their homeland, which had declared itself undefeated for a thousand years… They had come out to the wider world to see just how much strength backed that reputation. The answer was pitiless — they were relatively strong, but there were many even stronger out in the world. Their despair was deep, given how there really wasn’t anything to do about the conclusion.

No doubt that Ran would go on a rampage when she regained consciousness, and then she'd be killed or restrained. There was no possibility of her winning. They wanted to know how far they could go in the world, but with this answer, there's no redemption for them.

"…Oh, I know! I have a wonderful idea!"

The Regent laughed, evidently unconcerned with the melancholy of the young women. The fact that those around her couldn't imagine that she was planning anything good was about equal to her reputation among those who knew her.

In the Arcana Kingdom and surrounding countries, berserkers are known as the sort of absurdly powerful menace that can only be defeated with an army. That Sunae defeated one alone brought about a sudden re-evaluation by those in the kingdom in their attitudes toward Sunae herself, her art of Spirit Summoning, and her home kingdom of Magyan.

Up until now, Sunae had only been a young woman known as Saiga's fiancée, a woman who wielded a Rare Art, but whose claims to royal blood had been treated with skepticism. But now she had put herself on the line to fulfill her duty as Magyan Sunae.

"Thank you, Princess Sunae. If you had wanted to, you could have finished her with a single bite."

"…I had my own thoughts on the matter. She's someone I can kill at any time, so there's no need to kill her now."

Currently, the exhausted Ran is sleeping in the academy's infirmary, suffering from extreme malnutrition and fatigue. She wasn't able to move for some time.

The members of the Batterabbe party stand in front of her bed. They all know that she's definitely a dangerous person. There are plenty of records of what the Marked or berserkers have already wrought on this world. Even so, they all sympathized with her to some extent, particularly Sunae.

Sunae herself had challenged the world in her arrogance, lost to and fell in love with a man, then learned of an opponent who even that man could do nothing against. What was the difference between herself and the girl in the bed? The girl in the bed was one who couldn't complain if someone killed her, to be sure, but Sunae didn't feel any particular desire to kill her.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that… On the subject of this girl, I had a proposal. Miss Happine, would you be her guarantor?"

"What are you asking?"

"It's simple. Make her a guest of House Batterabbe."

Generally, Douve doesn't act in anti-social ways, because she has no need to. To put it bluntly, when bored, she will be cruel within the bounds of the law, but doesn't risk breaking it. If Batterabbe were to become guarantors of Ran and her friends, Douve wasn't likely to want them dead so much that she'd risk a conflict with another house.

"I'd rather not. Why should I have to endure a berserker in our house?"

One truth is that House Batterabbe is conservative, so far as martial houses go. The existence of Sansui in the House Sepaeda camp made them willing to accept an anomaly like Saiga, but they are generally not ones to accept those who they don't know into their midst.

House Sepaeda would willingly accept a dangerous presence if they felt the benefits outweighed the risks, but Batterabbe doesn't think like that. There's no right or wrong approach here; it's simply a difference in temperament. In that sense, Happine's words were perfectly correct.

"Please, for my sake."

"Why would it be for your sake, Regent...?"

"Oh come now, what would the harm be? There's plenty of value in it."

The Regent didn't hide the fact that she was doing this for her own entertainment. That was one of the things that made her something of a bother to deal with.

"First, this girl is a wielder of a Rare Art, even if she doesn't do it consciously. The Tainted Blood, I think it was called? She has that power flowing through her rather than mana, and in a much higher amount than is normal."

A power that was expressed not through a practiced art form, but as an unconsciously wielded strength that increases one's natural abilities. If that stems from a type of Rare Art, then others could learn how to wield it.

"Saiga... You should be able to learn it, yes? After all, every form of power flows through you."

"That might be true... But I don't intend to learn it."

"Oh, why? If you were to be able to recreate the power of the berserker, you can keep it from standing out with your mystic armor. Like your divination, it'd be an art you can use when fighting in public."

That was probably true. Or he could activate it with Spirit Summoning and wield even greater strength. He could combine it with mysticism and use it to instantly heal from even lethal blows. However, that meant learning a completely new art.

"I... After I lost to Sansui, I was told not to fear learning new arts. But... I want to make sure I've mastered the power that I already have. If I go back to learning new techniques now, I'd just end up only half-way learning everything..."

Although gifted with a talent for all forms of magic, it's not as though he could use them all at present. While Eckesachs had seen countless different wielders of the Rare Arts in her travels with Suiboku, as a mere amplifier, she couldn't teach those techniques to him. He can't learn new Arts without something to copy. And even if he could learn it, it would be limited to the very basics.

"When I was at Caputo, I couldn't do anything against mages who could fly. In effect, I can use a lot of very simple techniques... I don't want to regret not trying harder to master what I know. My current goal is to be able to deal with flying enemies."

Saiga needed goals. Because he could do just about anything, he didn't have a concrete or predetermined direction to focus his efforts on. As such, his current goal was to be able to fight flying opponents. It went without saying that the Marked weren't exactly equipped to tackle flying opponents.

"Oh, tehehe… You really do admire Sansui, don't you?"

"…Yes."

"That's a good thing. However, you are also a guest at this academy, making you one of my students as well. So, let me assign you some homework."

The truth was that it was an outcome the Regent desperately wanted to see, but it was also true that it would serve Saiga just as well.

"You can stick with just the basics. Learn how to wield power as a berserker from her. Once you do that, pass that on to whoever comes next."

There are plenty of people in the world with the Tainted Blood. Although they don't normally make use of it, as they don't have quite enough talent, there are still those who have the gift. Perhaps not all of them would want the power to become a berserker, just as not everyone with a talent for the Hex Arts becomes a hex caster. However, at this moment, the option doesn't even exist.

"The one who comes next… Who would that be?"

"Anyone you want it to be. Perhaps there's someone with the Tainted Blood among the swordsmen Sansui is teaching. Even if not, there might be someone in this academy who has that talent. They might be among the students with other talents who couldn't learn Shadow Summoning. But first, you need to learn the power from her."

The man who could learn any technique, Saiga Mizu… He was still searching for his own distinct fighting style. However, his strength isn't something that can be passed on. Further, it wasn't as though he could master any one thing. Yet, even still, there was value to it.

"There's no need for you to master the art of being a berserker. You only need to find a foothold. It doesn't matter if you only have a shallow grasp of it, a rough grasp of it, or an unpracticed grasp of it. All that matters is that you take her natural, unshaped art and put a shape to it. Take a power that can't currently be taught and turn it into a form, a martial art, scholarly knowledge, a technique…something that can be learned with the right gift. You learn and put a form to it, even if it's the most basic step, and if you can pass it on to someone else, then that will create a new Rare Art."

The hope and ambition of one educator struck Saiga like a lightning bolt.

"I don't need to master it?"

"No, you don't have to master it. You don't have to complete it entirely on your own. Leave that to those that come after you. That alone will have more value than any berserker who came before, who only had value in fighting battles."

He had thought that there was no meaning to something unless he could master it. He had thought that only those who had mastered something had

the right to teach it. He had thought that only those with a polished strength could teach. He had thought that only those who could see instruction through to the end could ever become teachers.

“This is your task, Saiga. Unlike Spirit Summoning, the power of the berserker has no political shackles. That is why your task is to pass the technique of using the Tainted Blood to someone else. Your task is to start a new type of Art.”

Part 6 — Discussion

“You’ve learned many forms of magic, but what stands out among them is Divination. You acquired that skill, albeit on a basic level, just by reading a book about it.”

Underlying those words is an issue that concerns her very mission as an educator. It’s understandable for someone like Shouzo or Ran, who have overwhelming amounts of talent, to be able to learn great things with just a little push.

However, for Saiga, he’s struggled immensely to develop anything beyond that level. It’s almost as though he’s hit the limits of his talent. By contrast, all of his other Arts have continued to develop in the meantime.

“Basically, there’s something about you that helps you learn the basics very quickly. So quickly that you can learn a new Art just by reading a book.”

Even with the existence of an instruction manual, it shouldn’t be possible to learn an Art without an instructor to make sense of it, so there must be something that helps him grasp the basics.

“Sansui can identify those with the Tainted Blood. I suppose we could have one of them learn how to wield it from there, but Ran, the Marked, doesn’t seem to have any awareness that she’s actually using an Art, so she has no way to teach it.”

The powers associated with the Marked are probably as Eckesachs described. That is, it’s an Art that vastly reinforces a person’s physical abilities and reflexes. As such, for the Marked — Ran and every other one in history — their ordinary state is one where they’re using their Art to enhance themselves. Since they’re not consciously doing anything out of the ordinary, it’s likely to be extremely difficult to teach someone else how.

But, in Saiga’s case…

“That...might be true.”

At the very least, there’s something he finds attractive about the idea. He doesn’t doubt that it’s something that only he can do. He could provide a ray of hope for students who couldn’t otherwise learn magic. If they’d rather not learn it, then that’s fine; they can choose not to take that option. But to lack the choice entirely, to have no opportunity to even know their own talent…

“No,” Happine says, putting a stop to the whole idea. “She’s a berserker, Regent. I can’t simply agree to serve as her guarantor.”

It was easy enough to restrain her using an ace, to be sure, but it’s necessary to consider the situation further. Essentially, she’s a very strong, rabid dog. To treat her as a guest meant that House Batterabbe would bear the responsibility if she caused a problem.

“I have no interest in being the guarantor of someone who goes on a rampage just because she’s bored.”

Happine's sentiment is perfectly understandable. Further, Saiga is to become Lord Batterabbe's son-in-law. As such, he can't go against House Batterabbe's wishes. Moreover, Happine's sentiment is both reasonable and natural. House Batterabbe would bear all the costs, so Happine and her father are the ones who have to make that call.

"Oh, that's disappointing."

Evidently the Regent is well aware of those facts, and doesn't bother to press the point. With both sides set on tabling the proposal, Saiga can't pick it up and give it a try on his own. But because he was so drawn by the proposal, his heart also can't just let go.

"Come with me, Saiga."

Evidently aware of this, Happine pulls Saiga out of the room by the hand, and the other members of the Batterabbe party follow with them. As the youngsters file out of the room, the Regent flashes them a warm smile. They can only guess at what she's thinking. But at the very least, that smile doesn't contain any malice.

Having left Ran's room, the party then finds a random side room to hold a discussion. The subject at the heart of this discussion is, of course, Saiga. It's not just Happine, either. Zuger also appears less than pleased with the situation.

"Saiga, what's been bothering you?"

"I saw it, too. You've been very melancholy as of late."

Evidently, it was clearly written on his face. Their words weren't even a little doubtful.

"…Yeah. I've been struggling. I've been worried about ending up a jack of all trades and a master of none."

He'd thought his ability to deal with a wide range of situations was his strength. In truth, he's perfectly capable of dealing with most situations. Being able to defend himself with mysticism, attack with magic, and have his abilities amplified by a legendary sword means that almost anything is within his ability to handle. Adding additional capabilities to those just increases his fighting ability and reduces his weaknesses. That's all fine, of course, but there are plenty of places where he just can't match a specialist. If that's so, can he really be described as strong?

"A little while ago, I'm sure I would have eagerly learned that Art, and then happily taught it to someone else, even without the Regent's suggestion. But now… Yeah, I'm definitely struggling with this. Even though I felt the proposal was a good one."

Saiga thus honestly reveals what's been going through his mind. The proposal had felt like it'd be The Answer for him. Something that only he could do, and something that would help others.

"Well, I doubt the Regent is completely serious about it. If she was really intent on manipulating you, she would have gotten you alone and talked you over first."

Besides, it's really doubtful a con artist would have asked for his cooperation out of the goodness of his heart. She probably said it was for the Academy's sake to make it easier for him to turn her down.

"What do you think you should do at a time like this? Talk to us, of course!"

"That's right! I may not be useful in combat, but I can at least serve as a sympathetic ear!"

"Yes, exactly. You are our man, and we are your women. As such, having heart-to-heart discussions goes without saying."

Three women crowd around one man and subject him to an interrogation. The situation is most certainly grim. He's completely surrounded.

"T-That's true... Yeah. Sorry."

"Anyway, that aside... What do you think is the most important thing right now? What to do with that girl...those girls. Do you want to kill her or not? Which is it?"

"...I'd rather not kill her. If that's possible."

Did the others want to kill her regardless? No, they probably didn't. It's not as though Ran had actually done anything wrong so far, so they can't really bring themselves to want to kill her. Sure, they all feel that she'll probably be the source of future problems if left alive, but they can't bring themselves to actively want to kill her *now*.

"Then let's try to move things in that direction. Even if there are hypothetical situations where we'd have to kill her, we can discuss ways to make sure we don't have to unless absolutely necessary."

Everyone nods their agreement as Happine speaks. How can they avoid having to kill her? That's the first and most important issue.

"So, how about it? Just how much do you know about berserkers, Eckesachs?"

"What I know is how to defeat them. As an Immortal, Suiboku was able to identify that they were prodigiously talented Rare Arts users and named their talent Tainted Blood. That's all it is."

The Marked, high-performance human beings with superhuman abilities. The way to defeat them is relatively well-known in the wider world: put them up against overwhelming numbers and wear them out, reinforce your defenses and wear them out, or attack them from outside their line of sight.

So on and so forth. They're difficult opponents, but not impossible to defeat. There's no need for Eckesachs to bother explaining those facts.

"To put it as precisely as possible, the Marked are wielders of an Art that enhances their abilities but puts them into an agitated aggressive state. That art is always active, and that is why they are dangerous."

"What an enormous bother."

Zuger's words are entirely appropriate.

A warrior in a constant state of agitation is nothing but a walking nuisance. When that agitation is combined with overwhelming strength, the

only options left for dealing with them are to kill them or drive them away. The residents of the hidden village are likely grateful that she left the village without needing to be driven out.

"At the moment, though, she's exhausted her Tainted Blood and can't use her Art. That is why her healing abilities don't work and she's collapsed from exhaustion… I wonder how long it takes her to recover."

"No way to know. In general, once a Marked is exhausted, they're just killed outright."

They've come to the obvious conclusion that exhausted Marked are safe. Well, that goes without saying. Even the most ferocious beast is harmless if exhausted. The problem is how to get them to that point, or how to go about taming them.

"What about using hex magic to restrain her? From what I heard, your older brother cast a spell of that sort upon House Caputo's ace. Is that possible, Zuger?"

"I-It's not impossible, but that's only possible with consent from the person in question…"

Zuger shoots down Sunae's proposal as a specialist in her particular field. "*If you don't behave, you'll be turned to stone.*" "*Okay, I consent.*" If the individual had that kind of temperament, there'd be no need to restrain them with hex magic in the first place.

"It's always active, right? If they're not consciously aware they're using magic, it's difficult to restrain them with Hex Arts."

For Shouzo, casting magic involves at least some conscious thought. At a minimum, he's not constantly using his magic. However, for Ran, it's natural for her to be using her Art at all times, which means telling her not to use her Art would probably be impossible for her to understand.

"If her Art is constantly active, it means we may as well permanently petrify her."

"I see… Apologies."

"No, I'm sorry I can't be of any use…"

So, they've come to the conclusion that Hex Arts can't be used to restrain her. It's a kind of progress just to know that's not an option.

"So the problem definitely seems to be that she's in a constant state of agitation… Say, Eckesachs, do you know of an Art that can seal off someone else's Art?"

"I do not, though my knowledge of the world is hardly comprehensive."

Hrrrm…

Well that's another idea that's run against the rocks. House Caputo undoubtedly struggled with Shouzo in much the same way. Keeping someone alive who'd otherwise die if you just left them to their own devices is rather difficult.

"…I guess that means I can't do everything myself."

It's not that he wants to become omnipotent, but not being able to restrain her on his own is frustrating. If asked why he was being so

sympathetic toward Ran or her companions, he wouldn't really be able to put his feelings into words. At the same time, though, it has got nothing to do with lust or attraction. He simply wants her to live.

"Then maybe it was impossible to learn how to become Marked from her in the first place…"

"…That's it!"

As Zuger remembers the Regent's homework assignment and mumbles her disapproval, Happine lets out a cry of realization. They'd been missing something that was right under their noses. It's possible that the Regent had set everything up to include that realization, but at the very least, this gives them a first step to aim for.

"Saiga! You have the Tainted Blood as well, and you're really good at learning the basics, right?!"

"Y-Yeah…"

"Then, first, you learn how to become Marked, then learn how to stop being Marked, and then you can teach Ran how to do that!"

"I-I'm not so sure I can…"

At the very least, they've found a solution. Well, it's more a proposal and potential solution than a sure-fire solution, and there's no guarantee that it'll actually work. But even so, the Batterabbe party has a concrete proposal to offer the girls from the Tempera Village.

Part 7 — Alignment

“Well, that’s fine. If you want that girl to live, there’s no reason to go out of my way to kill her. Still, it feels a little odd. I don’t remember you being so merciful.”

“I’m not mocking you, I’m just curious. Same with Tahlan’s sister, Sunae...”

“I won’t ask why you won’t kill her. But why are you trying to keep her alive?”

“As you told the Regent, leaving her alive is a threat to House Batterabbe’s name.”

“Even if you don’t clearly state your guardianship, it’s still rather risky.”

“It would be one thing if you were too stupid to understand this. But that you’re not.”

“If she stabilizes, no doubt you’ll put her under your protection. And you’re trying to make the effort to allow you to become her guardian.”

“Why are you so eager to let that girl live?”

Ran had collided with mundane reality.

In this world, it’s not possible for anyone to be absolutely invincible, or to be something so great that it’s the first and last of its kind. She may have been a unique talent in her village, an unmatched, undefeatable figure, but the moment she stepped out into the wider world, she was just one example of a rare talent.

And yet things remained just as dangerous for her. She had survived to this point because she was the strongest, but now she’s merely a dangerous nuisance. Ran — that is to say, berserkers, the Marked — were beings that were supposed to be killed. Sunae, in particular, had been taught by her parents to make sure to kill any Marked she ran into.

The fact that she’s defied that teaching and let Ran live was because her own feelings on the subject were complicated.

“...”

With it now being suppertime, Sansui had returned to the Academy along with Douve. An explanation of what had happened ensued, followed by a discussion where it was decided that House Batterabbe would try to find a way to bring her power under control. In spite of finding the course of events somewhat odd, Sansui and Douve have promised a certain amount of cooperation and thus went to look at the big fish from the small pond.

The four Rare Arts users who came out into the world believing in the unconscious Ran... In their frame of reference, they were martial artists.

“All four of them are users of unarmed combat techniques designed around a Rare Art... I suppose they’re decently strong.”

Happine, who can use a little bit of ordinary magic but can’t really fight, looks at the dejected quartet. It reminds her of what she and the rest of her

party had looked like only recently and the reminder sets off a faint pang in her heart.

“You four… I’d like to talk to you. You can just sit and listen.”

From the Sepaeda party’s point of view, the Batterabbe party seems excessively kind. Are they really that kind-hearted? They’re looking for reasons to save the life of a dangerous individual, one who would otherwise be easily killed. Sunae, who could have killed Ran but didn’t, and Happine, who could abandon Ran but won’t, both seem sympathetic to the four’s plight.

“You four are a danger. Well, not you four specifically, but that berserker, Ran. She’s been defeated pretty easily, but that’s just a matter of relative strengths. Just as she dominated everyone in your village, there are only a handful of people in this kingdom who can defeat her.”

It was fortunate for the kingdom that they had been seeking strong opponents. Since it wasn’t a time of war or anything, they had sought out the strongest individual in the kingdom. Having wandered the kingdom and asked around, everyone had mentioned the name ‘Sansui.’ And they hadn’t really caused any problems until they ran into Sansui.

“If we leave you alone, no doubt you’ll cause a fuss. This Academy has incredibly strong people who can keep you in line, but that’s not true for the rest of the kingdom. Many soldiers and knights serving this kingdom would fall victim if anything were to happen.”

It would have been best if she’d been content to be the biggest fish among small fry, but in spite of that, they chose to seek to become the greatest in the world. And having challenged the greatest, they promptly lost, as they could have been expected to lose.

“Batterabbe is a great martial house. If something is a potential threat to this kingdom, then our duty is to stop it before it can do any damage. Relax. We won’t attack her while she sleeps or anything. I have an ace named Saiga, a man who can most certainly win, even against the woman you believe to be the strongest.”

Ran’s method of being the strongest was within the bounds of the mundane. It was a kind of strength that could be dealt with. It was strength that couldn’t defeat an opponent it matched poorly against. But there are kinds of strength that aren’t constrained that way, like a strength that surpasses the countless ‘strongest’ individuals that exist throughout society. The strength that the girls believed in. There are aces who are literally, not figuratively, equivalent to an entire army on their own.

“If Ran goes on another rampage, like she has done in the past, death is the only thing that awaits her.”

Aces aren’t just strong. Aces secure victory the moment they’re played, regardless of who they’re facing. Even Saiga, who is still developing, will hit those heights soon enough. Even at present, so long as he focuses on winning, there’s no way he’d lose against Ran.

“However… If she can learn to control her madness, her state as a berserker, then things are different. She becomes worth keeping alive.”

But he doesn’t want to do that. Seeing the four girls, the Batterabbe party are reminded of their own past.

“You four need to help. I know it’ll be difficult. Even if the Tainted Blood that maintained her agitated state is restrained, her base personality isn’t going to change much. The difficulty there is something you understand more than we do, I think.”

They’ve been reminded of something by seeing the four girls. The future that awaits them, the dejection from being defeated.

“But even then, work with us. If things don’t change, everything just ends. The person you put so much faith into dies, and that’s the end. There might be a future awaiting you. There might be a path forward where you become stronger. There might be something wonderful waiting for you. Maybe you won’t find anything after surviving, but if you’re dead, the possibilities end there!”

Her words seem to be trying to urge them to stand. Happine desperately wanted them to stand again.

“I’m saying that, if you four keep your eyes downcast, Ran will die!”

That wouldn’t be a problem for Happine, really. Letting her live could very well mean the loss of countless lives, but still, she wanted Ran to live. Or perhaps more importantly, she didn’t want the girls to abandon Ran.

“Why do you say that...?”

“Surely you have no reason to care about us now...”

“No doubt you think us beneath contempt...”

“Leave us alone...”

The thing they’d believed in had been shattered. Relatively easily, as though proving a point. That is why they were so dejected. The egos they’d nurtured had popped, leaving them with the feeling that they weren’t particularly impressive.

“You aren’t listening! I’m saying that if things don’t change, Ran is going to die!”

Yes... It’s like they’re seeing themselves again.

“I’m saying that if you do nothing and just let that berserker go on a rampage again, we’ll have no choice but to kill her! I’m saying that if you four abandon her, we’ll have no choice but to kill her!”

Saiga, the man who could wield every art. Saiga, the man accepted by the ultimate legendary sword. The man they believed to be the strongest. They’ve seen that man get beaten, easily, in front of their eyes.

“Help her! Protect her! Don’t abandon her! Keep fighting! Or what? Are you just going to abandon her because she wasn’t as strong as you thought she was?!”

Which is why they understand the girls’ despair. Because, after all, they were quite thoroughly shown that the thing they believed in was ultimately insignificant.

“Does the fact that the person you believed in lost mean you no longer care about her, either?”

If they abandon Ran, it’ll be like watching themselves abandon Saiga.

“You followed her because she was strong, right?! You left your village because you looked up to her! You wanted to be with her because she was amazing, even if she was a bit uncouth, isn’t that right?! Even though you hadn’t gotten stronger, you felt like you were stronger because you were with her, didn’t you?!”

They were drawn to strength. That’s true. They wouldn’t have paid her any notice without that strength. But to abandon someone they accepted over a loss isn’t acceptable. It’s the worst possible thing anyone could do. They didn’t want the girls to commit such an awful act.

“You were proud when she won, weren’t you?!”

Saiga lost to the Sepaeda bodyguard three times. He’s even become his apprentice now. Sansui let him go all three times. He lost handily each time,

but the situation was resolved each time without killing Saiga. It's disgraceful, it's frustrating, it's embarrassing… Saiga himself feels that way. They, too, feel that way, to a lesser extent.

"I'm asking you this. Are you just going to side with her when she's winning, then throw her away when the going gets tough?!"

But Saiga is still trying. He might wander, he might struggle, but he keeps looking forward, not content with the status quo, wanting to better himself. Death is the end, but defeat isn't. And Ran is still alive, and the girls can help keep her that way.

"If you abandon her, what are you going to do? I'm asking what you'll do. Are you going to cry that she fooled you when she claimed she wouldn't lose to anyone, that you were disappointed that you didn't get to bask in her glory, and say she was all talk? Are you going to just abandon her for that and go on living life half-heartedly?!"

Saiga fought fairly and lost, and that is nothing to be ashamed of. He admitted defeat to a superior opponent; also nothing to be ashamed of. He knows his weakness and he's struggling with it. That's not anything to be ashamed of, either. And they themselves, who believed and continue to believe in him, have nothing to be ashamed of. If there's anything that might be truly shameful, it'd be if they abandoned him.

Those fights hadn't had anything on the line. They hadn't lost anything in the process. All that had been wounded was their pride. It's likely Ran will struggle with that in her own way. If her four fellow Temperans abandon her, that will be something to be ashamed of.

The swordsmen under Sansui's instruction saw themselves in the opponents they'd cut down when fighting in Caputo. They saw themselves when they looked upon the heads displayed by House Sepaeda.

And now the Batterabbe party sees themselves in the dispirited group of girls.

"That's far more disgraceful than anything else!"

The girls in front of them are also hurting. They know, after all, that they were the same way. But it's not like they'll die if they're just left this way. The one who actually fought and bled was Ran, the one who believed in herself more than anyone else was Ran, the one who most doesn't want to admit her defeat is Ran, and the one who'll die if things don't change is Ran.

"You were traveling companions! This is when you're supposed to help each other!"

There's a saying that only those who know pain can know true compassion. At the very least, Happine Batterabbe can't abandon the young women who've hit the same wall she overcame.

Part 8 — Setback

Wow, that was intense. They're really living it up.

Honestly, it was a speech that made me want to applaud. Happine Batterabbe was working hard to convince the girls from the Tempera Village.

She has a point. In order to convince an agitated Ran to go along with the plan, the help of her companions would certainly be invaluable. It's the right decision to go ahead and cover their bases while she was passed out from exhaustion.

"Snerk."

At the same time, I can't help but feel uneasy at Lady Douve's snickering. No doubt she finds it hilarious that her inferior, Happine, sympathizes with a bunch of yokels that she views as being even beneath her rival.

"You know, I've never lost, so I can't understand what she's going through. It's such a shame that I can't relate."

Standing next to me, Blois looks a little disgusted. It's true that Blois and I have almost never lost. Or really, if we'd ever lost, Lady Douve wouldn't be alive. Which is why we can't lose, of course, but for that reason, Lady Douve has never actually suffered any sort of setback.

She's treating the dejection from the setbacks that Happine and the girls are bonding over as something completely foreign her to. She's dismissing it as losers trying to soothe one another's bruised egos...

"Besides, there's no way some village of hermits could be that strong."

Lady Douve, I was off cloistered in some random woods, and isn't that about the same thing?

But still, putting aside her malice, she's not exactly wrong. At the very least, the reason Ran was without peer in her home village was because the village was closed off and stable. Putting it positively, the techniques were well-developed and had spread to a large population; to put it negatively, it'd become mired in formalism and little more than a sport, so everyone used the same movements.

If her strength came from superhuman reflexes and concentration, then she could defeat practitioners of the same school with ease, no matter how many of them she fought. This isn't the best phrasing, but their village had been at peace for a long time. While they practiced martial arts, they probably didn't do so with warfare in mind. Even considering that, of course, she's still absurdly strong.

"I mean, is there even enough value to keep her alive in spite of all that? Sansui, what do you think?"

"The berserker, Ran, is a remarkable talent, but the others are quite normal."

The four that made up Ran's retinue weren't particularly skilled wielders of their Rare Arts. They probably weren't particularly elite, just the kids who happened to be drawn to Ran's strength.

"Berserker... They're supposed to be legendary monsters, but even Tahlan's sister beat her, right? So at most she's maybe at the level of the Sword and Shield Companies?"

"No, she's at least a few levels above them. She's strong enough to take on the entirety of both the Sword and Shield Companies and bring them down with her."

Hearing my evaluation, both Lady Douve and Blois turn pale. Well, yeah, that's understandable. I beat her easily, and Sunae beat her, too, so it's not surprising that they didn't view her as that big of a threat.

"Her strength comes from her agility and reflexes. Without using the Mystic Arts to reinforce one's defenses like a paladin, or improving one's physical toughness with Spirit Summoning, a normal human being wouldn't be able to stand up to her just by wearing armor."

It seems that she has regenerative abilities, but I doubt they're so ridiculous that she can recover instantly from a direct hit from magic. As such, they can beat her if they can hit her, but none of them can hit her in the first place. She doesn't just have superhuman speed, she's also got the reflexes to control that speed. Even if the lightning and heat spells are faster than she is, if they're wielded by humans with average reflexes, they won't ever land.

She's probably nearly invincible against infantry. The only way to beat her, aside from Spirit Summoning, would be to overwhelm her with sheer numbers. Mystics might be able to survive her attacks, but they're limited on their offensive abilities.

"Still, she's still quite raw. If she can learn to control herself, she'll become much stronger."

What she needs is self-control. If she can nurture that, then it's likely no one but Saiga and I could handle her. No doubt even a group of Spirit Summoners would fall before her. It's not that her attack ability would really go up, so I suppose she might not be able to defeat mystics. She already has an immense amount of Tainted Blood. It goes without saying she'll become much stronger once she can control it.

"Does that mean... She'd approach the same realm as you, Sansui?"

"No, that wouldn't happen, Blois. I'd rather not say this myself, but that's asking for too much."

Sure, in theory, she'd be getting closer to me, but that's just theory. I suppose I'm not one to talk, but training doesn't bear fruit that easily.

"Still, she'd likely become an extremely powerful warrior. That much I can guarantee."

Though, I suppose the issue of how to deal with a flying opponent would remain. But I'm not good at that either, so I can't really be too critical there.

“A warrior that’s next to the aces in power… A new force for House Batterabbe… W-Well, I have you two, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Well, if we’re going to go there, I’m pretty sure my master is at a level where he could take on all the aces at once and win. I mean, I don’t really know a lot about Disaea’s ace, but I’m sure my master could beat him. In my case, I can’t use fancy techniques, but my master simply chooses not to use them while still knowing how to wield them. That difference is also probably quite pronounced.

“But that’s still up to her. If she won’t listen to her friends and goes on a rampage… Well, that would be up to your judgment, Lady Douve.”

She doesn’t have much in the way of defensive power, so she’s a relatively easy opponent for me. This sounds arrogant, but right now, there’s no way for her to catch me.

“…Since you put it that way, I don’t plan to issue any proactive orders. Keep your responses to the bare minimum needed.”

An order to kill her if she goes on a rampage isn’t particularly in character for House Sepaeda. For all that, it seems like she’s at least thinking about Happine’s position when she’s acting as a member of House Batterabbe. Should I take that as the confidence of the strong, or an attitude common to the nobility?

At the very least, Lady Douve has moved her understanding of the girl Ran from someone who can be killed to someone to be watched. Indeed, she’s not wrong there. I suppose that’s the line Lady Douve won’t cross.

“Still, Tempera Village… That there’s such a village, and that your master once decimated it… Such an odd confluence of events.”

On that I’m in complete agreement. I mean, the other day I ran into seven of the Eight Sacred Treasures and all of them knew my master. There’s evidently still numerous remnants lingering from when my master was still wandering around the world instead of cloistering himself from it, as he is now.

“As it happened over two thousand years ago, I suppose it’s only natural that their names are no longer known. It all occurred over fifteen hundred years before I was born. It’s an unimaginably long span of time.”

“…Oh that’s right, indeed.”

Lady Douve’s a little repulsed, but faintly jealous. I suppose immortality is one of those things that’s thought of that way and it can’t really be helped.

In the end, Ran didn’t wake up that day. Having used up the entirety of her power for the first time in her life, she slept through the entire night.

“Urgh… Ugh…”

And even once awake, it took her a while to get out of bed. She was finally able to get out of bed with the help of the other four. Her aura was very weak, and it almost hurt to look upon it.

“So…hungry…”

Evidently, she used an immense amount of calories to repair the missing flesh, and her hunger was obvious with her hair in its natural color, rather than its usual burning silver. She'd been through so much that it's hard to remember why she came here in the first place.

"Yum, delicious."

At first she had her friends feed her, eating a porridge made by soaking bread in soup. As her strength returned and she began to feed herself, she started asking for meat and fish. Saiga and I are watching over her in case she goes on a rampage, but wow, that's an impressive appetite. The Regent's being extremely generous with her food, and it's certainly an appetite that's a joy to feed.

"Mrrrmph!"

After almost choking on a plateful, she somehow finishes eating and lets out a breath. From her point of view, no doubt she was desperate to recover from virtual starvation.

"Her Tainted Blood decreased a bit… Looks like she used it to convert her meal into energy."

"You can tell things like that?!"

The Regent looks at me intently. Still, based on Ran's presence, she's been subconsciously using her powers as a berserker. It depends on what it is, exactly, but there are foods that require energy to digest. That's why she was being fed soup and bread, which are both easily digested.

However, once she regained some strength from that, she must have forced her body to replenish itself so that she could eat on her own. She has an almost staggering amount of vitality.

"At any rate, currently, her Tainted Blood isn't keeping up with her physical recovery. It's easy enough to see with her hair, but right now, anyone should be able to restrain her."

"What, what are you talking about?! What's going on…? Wha?! My hair!"

Ran checks her hair. There's no ferocity in her actions, just confusion. No need to read auras to see that.

"As Eckesachs explained, you've unconsciously kept an Art activated. The source of that power, your Tainted Blood, ran out, so the hair color, which was evidence of your enhancement, returned to its original color."

Of course, from her point of view, her hair had always been silver, so she doesn't see it as her hair returning to anything.

"As proof of that, you'll notice you can't use your usual strength."

"That's because I'm still recovering!"

"Well, that's accurate to a certain extent, but…"

Of course, I'm sure she's recovered quite a bit from spending the entire night sleeping. Still, I don't feel as much vitality from her as I did yesterday. At the very least, it's not overflowing from her.

"I'm not weakened! Just watch!"

She furrows her brow, tensing and turning red with effort. It looks like she's just trying to tense her own muscles, but since her Art is a simple enhancement, she's actually taking the right steps to activate it.

Those around her are confused, but they relax as I watch in silence. I suppose they're dependent on me. Well, actually, I suppose they're certain that I can restrain her if needed.

"Raaaaaah!"

Her long hair ripples like flame into a silver color, starting at the roots. This means she's enhancing herself. However, that also means she's depleting herself, as well.

"...!"

And, of course, she quickly runs out of energy. She remains seated in her chair but faceplants into the desk. The color returns to her hair. She couldn't finish with her enhancement.

"Am I... Am I...done for?" she said, weakly.

Despair, puzzlement, a concern that she was no longer strong. It's likely the first time she's suffered such a setback.

"That really is the best of life..."

Thinking about it, did I ever suffer such setbacks in my life? I mean, I spent all my time training, so I've never lost, and I've never lost anyone close to me. In that sense, it's easy to imagine, but hard to relate.

"Ran...are you okay?"

"You need to rest a little more."

"Yeah... Are you fully awake?"

"Do you remember why you were asleep?!"

I've heard it was a pretty brutal fight. It must have been a duel between a demon and a beast, and it sounded bad enough I was glad Lain hadn't watched it.

"More...more food..."

That's an impressive digestive system. I'm honestly impressed. Her stomach rumbles again, so evidently she's hungry. Then again, she looks like she needs to go to the bathroom, too.

"I see that berserkers also have enhanced metabolisms."

You know, I wonder if berserkers also have a shorter lifespan. They look like they're rushing through life so quickly that you'd almost expect them to burn out of natural life by the time they're somewhere in their thirties.

"Oh my... Then I'll bring you some more."

The Regent looks pleased that Ran is eating so much. Still, Ran is being supported by her friends, so she doesn't have a shred of strength left in reserve. I suppose that if she's hungry she can't be unhealthy, either.

"So that's what it's like to activate the Tainted Blood..."

At the same time, Saiga was watching her attempt to reawaken her power. By actually watching her bring forth her Tainted Blood, it seems he's managed to grasp something. He probably intends to practice it later. Likely

as not, he'll probably get the knack for it after a few times. The question is, can we get her to want to restrain herself?

"You're still quite weak. You'll need to take some rest."

"Dammit…"

"This is probably the first time in your life you've ever felt any fatigue, failure, or depression… So, listen carefully."

Thinking about it, she's probably been told this many times in her life. I'm honestly not sure I'll get through to her, either.

"Yesterday, you lost to me in a fight, and lost to Princess Sunae as well. I'm sure you remember this."

"…"

"You're strong. It's not that you've rapidly become weaker since your arrival here, it's just that you fought opponents you couldn't defeat. Right now, no matter how many times you challenge us, you won't be able to defeat me or Princess Sunae."

There's no rage; there's no counterargument. She quietly waits to hear what she's missing.

"The thing you are missing. It is…"

"It is?"

"The ability to wait. Self-restraint."

Hearing those words, the five from the Tempera Village open their eyes wide. I suppose that's to be expected, as no doubt they've all heard that before.

"Still, I doubt you will understand right now how that translates into strength. It's said there are such things as mysterious wins, but no mysterious losses. However, there are times when you don't know why you lost."

I mean, in my case, I knocked her out with the first blow. She probably doesn't have the faintest idea of what I actually did to her. That's how I fight, after all. As such, self-restraint doesn't have much to do with it.

Well, that's on me. I need to train more.

"However, if you don't nurture your ability to wait, you won't be able to stand again. I understand your desire to fight, to drive away your irritation, but for now, please focus on recovering your strength with your companions."

"Until now, the old men in the village kept telling me to bear it. But wasn't that because they saw my strength and couldn't bear it themselves?"

"I think there's an element of that. You're strong, and it's difficult for ordinary people to restrain you. Which is why I want you to restrain yourself."

"Then there should be no reason for me to conform for those weaklings!"

She's got a point. She's touching upon the fundamental reason people seek strength.

“To live as you want, to fight as you want… That, too, is the privilege of the strong. But I don’t believe you understand what it means for you to lose and expose yourself to the world.”

She doesn’t yet understand fear. She’s no different from my students before they faced me. She doesn’t think there’s anything in the world that won’t bend to her will, and can’t bear the thought that there is. In her case, bearing it is even more difficult than for most.

“If you learn self-restraint, at the very least, you will be able to defeat Princess Sunae.”

“…And can I beat you?”

“As for that, you will discover just how difficult that will be, if you mean to learn self-restraint.”

Part 9 — Reason

In the end, it's decided that Ran will have a day of rest. With that settled, the four girls from the Tempera Village are asked to conduct a demonstration in exchange for their room and board. The demonstration takes place in the Academy's trusty old arena. I feel like we should just go ahead and call it the Coliseum.

"Today, we have FOUR wielders of exotic Rare Arts, ones that even I've never heard of!"

The Regent was extremely enthusiastic. I suppose as a researcher and an educator, it must be exciting to see new, hitherto unknown fields of development. Even in my case, I prefer to fight an opponent who's put in the effort to develop their own fighting style than a genius who's still developing.

"Bursting Venom Style, which uses Seeping Blood; Drunken Fist Style, which uses Inebriated Blood; Four Vessels Style, which uses Orb Blood; and Mist Shadow Style, which uses Illusion Blood. That's the four, right?"

"Yes, that's correct. They are the ones my wielder fought two thousand years ago. Given that we thoroughly decimated them during that time, I'm surprised that their styles persisted."

My master's former partner, Eckesachs, serves as her assistant. Given that they're opponents she actually faced and defeated, there's no doubt that explaining it is right in her wheelhouse.

As for the berserker, Ran, she's sitting to my side. Of course, we're in the VIP section, so Lady Douve is with us, as well. Even if I'm supposed to subdue her if she gets violent, is it wise to have her sitting with Lady Douve? As a bodyguard, I have my doubts, but it seems she's decided it's safest to be near me.

"Okay, then. Eckesachs, can you explain their fighting styles?"

"Very well. Master, as I will be explaining the Seeping Blood's Bursting Venom Style and the Orb Blood's Four Vessels Style, please use me to create a wall," she says, immediately making a weird request.

Pretty sure everyone in the academy is surprised by that request. Saiga, in particular, seems unsure if he should proceed.

"Hurry up. They'll just be attacking the wall."

"O-Okay… Maximum Bright Wall!"

What she intended was simple: create a wall of light and have them attack it. Even if they fail, they'll only suffer light injuries at the worst.

"So we need to attack this wall?"

"Never expected to see a fighting style like this…"

Two of the girls drop into a stance in front of the wall. What they have in common is that they have nothing on their hands and feet. Of course, having nothing on their hands makes sense, but they're also shoeless. They may as

well be shouting that there's something in their styles involving their feet at the top of their lungs.

Further, there are no notable scars on their hands. It's not that they're not scarred at all, but for fighting bare-handed, they're a little too clean. More than anything, their auras are unique, full of a power other than magic.

"Bursting Venom Style... Siege Fist: Battering Ram!"

With a soft plop, the Bursting Venom Style girl presses her palm to the wall, at which point her Seeping Blood steadily flows from her into the light barrier. The wall's color changes enough that it's immediately obvious to everyone.

"Burst!"

She removes her hand, takes a few steps back, and lets out a shout, at which point the wall of light explodes, shattering as though from within. This kingdom's people are the ones who best understand what this means. The Magyan siblings are only mildly surprised, but for this kingdom this isn't a regular shock. A wall of light, which can only be pierced by heat or lightning magic, has just been utterly destroyed.

"My style is the Bursting Venom Style, only wielded by those with the Seeping Blood! No other style is as suited for killing as ours!"

"...So slow. It seems she's less practiced than I thought," Eckesachs coolly interjects her own commentary as the girl boasts to the assembled crowd. The Bursting Venom Style girl's expression goes from proud to frozen in embarrassment. I guess she's pretty weak from the standards of her style.

"The Bursting Venom Style fills the target with the Seeping Blood, then makes it explode. It requires contact with the palm or the sole of the foot, but the effects are as you saw. The nature of the techniques mean that the longer the wielder touches the target, the more powerful the effect. However, it's one thing if you're destroying a wall or gate, but against a human, the longer the contact, the greater the danger. As such, the more skilled the wielder, the quicker they fill the target with Seeping Blood."

That goes without saying. It's one thing if you're assassinating someone, but in hand to hand combat, you only get a short window to touch your opponent. Then again, if you can destroy a part of the body, it seems like it'd be fine to have it restricted to a small effective area, but even then, the shorter the better.

"Now, make another wall."

"S-Sure."

To create walls, just to destroy them... It's a form of destruction testing.

"Four Vessels Style... Right Arm Lance: Piercing Lunge!"

The Four Vessels Style wielder lunges with her open hand like a spear. She coats her hand with an aura — that is, her Orb Blood — and drives her hand into the wall. With that, her otherwise extremely fragile human fingers penetrate deeply into the wall of light.

“M-My style…is a style wielded by those with the Orb Blood…and is a fighting style that turns the body’s four limbs into weapons.”

“…How weak. My wielder from two thousand years ago was able to put a chip in my Ki-reinforced blade.”

Wait, my master couldn’t cut through it?!

Just how strong were the Four Vessels wielders from two thousand years ago?

That’s harsh… To be described as weak despite being able to penetrate a reinforced mystical wall.

“Well, it’s easy to see the results. It’s a style that is perhaps the natural enemy of a combat-focused mystic. It’s an attack-focused martial art that, if it hits, can even destroy a Sacred Treasure. Its weakness is…well, the short range,” says Eckesachs, back in her human form, praising the style.

Since the Mystic Arts are used by humans, I suppose it’s not surprising that there’s another human Art that can destroy its constructs. It’s hard to imagine just what my master felt at the time, after having Eckesachs suffer a chip on her blade.

“So, the reason the Bursting Venom Style artists keep their feet barefoot is to be able to make the ground explode. Even if they can’t attack their opponent directly, if they can soak the ground below them in Seeping Blood, they can restrict their movements. While it substantially lowers the impact, and would probably make it defensible with mystic barriers, it’s still more than enough to fight an ordinary human opponent,” Eckesachs says, casually explaining the style’s special techniques.

The two girls look a bit upset, having had the secrets of their techniques from their hidden village laid bare to the world. Alas, poor girls. But this, too, stems from their lack of training.

“Illusion Blood’s Mist Shadow Style is also quite impressive to look at. Give us a show.”

“Huh? O-Oh, yes…”

The Mist Shadow Style artist is wearing loose fitting clothing. No doubt in actual combat the clothing would hide hidden weapons. It might just be for show at the moment, though.

“Mist Shadow Style! Eight Reflections!”

Eight duplicates burst forth from her body. Seeing this, the students and teachers in the Coliseum…

Well, they barely react. Compared to the earlier two demonstrations, there’s even a sense of anticlimax.

“Umm?! What’s with your reaction?!”

The other two caught the audience by surprise, but they seem unfazed this time. That fact clearly upsets her.

“Illusion Blood can create illusions. It’s fundamentally different from Shadow Presence, which creates duplicates.”

Yes, it probably doesn't look that different from Shadow Summoning. But, in reality, the duplicates she created are just illusions. They have no actual mass, and can't attack or defend.

"While Shadow Summoning duplicates have a presence and require precise control, the fact that the Illusion Blood only creates illusions means that they can be moved rather more broadly. In fact, they can even be deployed into the air."

"D-Don't make it sound so easy! This is actually pretty hard, you know!"

"Of course. Certainly. Unlike Shadow Summoning, which creates duplicates of the summoner, the illusions crafted through the Mist Shadow Style can be changed at will. To put it another way, the wielder must craft the illusions in their own mind."

I don't want to put it this way, but who actually thought making this into a martial art was a good idea? I mean, the other two require fighting bare-handed, and they're probably stronger that way. But for this one, I don't understand why it needs to be a bare-handed fighting style.

I mean, sure, it's strong in that it can be used for feints and to overwhelm the opponent's line of sight, but if anything, this is better suited for ambushes than hand to hand combat.

"To add another item, while the duplicates summoned with Shadow Summoning block the summoner's line of sight, the illusions created by Illusion Blood are transparent to the wielder. I hear it's quite tiring, but they can literally cover an entire area with mist."

"…That's our ultimate technique."

I feel bad saying this about their ultimate technique, but my master and I can read people's presences, so it probably didn't actually work on him.

"The Inebriated Blood's Drunken Fist Style… This is the style that gave us the most trouble, two thousand years ago. It creates a field around the wielder that throws off the sense of balance of all within it, and the martial art takes advantage of that to attack with throwing moves and grapples. The more skilled the wielder, the wider and more powerful the field. My master tried quite stubbornly to beat them with his sword, but when they came at him together, he gave up and beat them by throwing rocks at them… Such memories," Eckesachs says, wistfully, reminiscing about her time with my master.

"She just described my entire style without me even demonstrating it…"

Meanwhile, the Drunken Fist Style girl, having had everything about her style explained, including how to deal with it, looks at a loss for how to respond.

Still, to have made my master give up, that's actually quite impressive…

"Say, Sansui, how did you deal with them?"

"First, I approached Ran using Flash Step and took her down with a Ki Wave to her head. I then took down the Four Vessels Style and Bursting Venom Style wielders with my Ki Blade, knocked out the Mist Shadow Style

user the same way, and finally used my Feather Step to throw the unconscious four at the Drunken Fist Style wielder."

At Lady Douve's question, I answer with a complete account of what I did yesterday morning. The martial arts of the four girls were quite sloppy, and it was easy enough to hit them with my wooden blade. Even if they can harden their hands or make things they touch explode, if I can just attack them by avoiding their hands and feet, they're no threat.

The Drunken Fist Style alone I could do nothing about in melee combat, because I couldn't really approach her, but I just had to avoid getting into her field, so that wasn't much of a problem. It's important to be able to see the big picture, and being overconfident in one's abilities is a sign of immaturity. In that sense, I suppose my master still had much further to go, given that he was fixated on winning in close combat.

"You really are dull..."

"I'm afraid so..."

If my master was throwing rocks, it probably would have shattered the opponent's skull...

And even if they tried to block them, the rocks probably would have broken their arms, so that must have been frustrating, from their point of view. However, defending against stone throwing is pretty much one of the basics, so if you're actually fighting instead of sparring, it's worth learning.

The only conclusion that remains...a lack of training. Yes, training is important. I mean, more than anything, if they can use a technique that makes an opponent collapse when they approach, then it's natural to look to attack from long range. If they can't deal with that, then it's not a fully polished technique.

"Well, in this case, it's probably best to experience it themselves. Those that wish to experience it should step up and volunteer."

"What a lovely idea! Very well, then, let's all try experiencing it!"

At Eckesachs's suggestion, a large number of students and teachers go down into the arena. Well, I suppose it's worthwhile to experience it at least once. I mean, this is still a class.

"...I have a question for you," Ran says, grumpily. This is probably the first time in her life that she's been this quiet. "You're the strongest swordsman in this kingdom, right?"

"Yes, I suppose. At least, to the extent that I'm confident I won't lose to anyone but my master."

I'm sure that there are actually opponents who I can't beat. Even then, though, I don't intend to go out of my way to find them. Shouzo is one example, but thinking further, there's really no end to it.

And if I actually went through with that search, the only thing waiting for me is despair, like my master experienced. It's simply not worth it. And I mean, further, I'm still at a stage where I enjoy training.

"Which is probably why..."

"Why, what?"

“The reason you’re still alive.”

Because I’m here, because I didn’t kill her, she’s still alive. There’s a part of me that regrets not killing her. I really need more training.

Part 10 — Arrogance

“In Magyan, the strongest becomes king… That’s not incorrect. I believe you, as a man, understand that,” the Regent says to me.

“The king’s job, after all, is to protect their country. As such, they have to be able to defeat any evildoers who come into their lands, whether using soldiers or their own strength. Moreover, the one with the most authority can even take down berserkers. No doubt the king is quite popular.”

Just as importantly, it’s easy to understand. For example, deciding who is right can be difficult to determine. You can’t know their skill if you don’t have them actually try competing ideas. However, strength is easy to understand. This is even more the case when we’re talking about individual strength.

“Even when fighting, it’d be restricted to within the royal family. Once you become king, you have to continue training by fighting other Spirit Summoners. In that sense, it’s a good system.”

If you have an objection, you challenge the king. The king needs to maintain enough strength to put down the challenger. It’s quite ridiculous when you think about it, but it also makes a certain type of sense. At the very least, their subjects seem willing to accept it.

“The Domino Empire wasn’t much different. They placed an enormous amount of power in the hands of the emperor, which allowed them to move their giant country at the whim of an individual. In effect, they were the leviathan.”

“I’m a mere bodyguard. This is beyond my pay grade.”

“You’re an Immortal, and can give up on and discard things that are unnecessary to you. It really is impressive. I can’t hope to do the same.”

She respects me and she finds me deeply impressive. But she doesn’t look up to me and she doesn’t care to model herself on me. Her words conveyed that meaning.

“It’s because of that character that the people of House Sepaeda trust you. So long as they don’t betray you, you’ll meet their expectations.”

I suppose that’s true. The people of House Sepaeda seem to trust me quite a bit. That’s something worth celebrating.

“But not everyone can act the way you do. Great power brings arrogance, special privileges bring corruption, and those two things ruin people. In that sense, you’re a better person than anyone else.”

I don’t think that’s quite right. I know what the Regent is trying to say, but it’s a bit of a problem for her to put me on a pedestal that way.

“I know it’s not what you want, but your presence is reassuring to this country. Your power is needed to keep the kingdom from ending up like its neighbor.”

That’s a heavy burden. Frankly, it’s not something a mere swordsman should bear. It’s an excessive overestimation of my abilities.

“So long as you’re here, things won’t get so bad so to be unfixable. Which is why the kingdom can try so many different things. That, of course, goes for me, too.”

Ran and I are facing off again. It’s been two days since our last fight, and I’m not sure if it’s too soon or a bit late. The only thing that I can say for sure is that, right now, her hair is back to resembling rippling silver flames.

An excited Ran thus faces off against me in the arena, which means this will be a public exhibition.

“I’ve constantly had people tell me that I need to restrain myself. But all of those who’ve said that could do nothing against me. There wasn’t any weight to the words coming from the weak. And yet… Even you, the one who beat me, give me the same lecture!”

“That’s because it’s true. Allow me to prove it, not with words, but with action.”

There are a lot of spectators. A large number of students and teachers, and even some nobles, have filled the stands. At the same time, there’s no referee to judge this fight. The truth of the matter is, about the only one person worthy of judging a fight between us is my master.

“There’s no one to give the signal to begin, either. Regardless of what anyone else present thinks, my intention is to simply fight you.”

“Meaning… The fight’s already started, right?”

“Yes.”

Her movement in response to my words is impressively fast. Despite being in an agitated state, with rage driving her, she’s able to restrain herself. At least, so I’m telling myself, but the expression on her face as she charges at me could only be described as a battle-mad smile.

Quite simply, she’s fast. Running with almost ideal form for a sprint, she rapidly closes the distance between us. She’s moving faster than any normal human ever could, but it’s not so fast that I can’t see her, so she’s not moving so fast as to make her impossible to see. At most, she’s moving at a speed that you might miss if you were to blink.

Still, hitting her with a long-range attack would likely be extremely difficult, and I doubt she’d give someone enough time to gain a bead on her.

“Graaaaah!”

There’s no hesitation or reserve, only fierce joy, as she attacks. Our eyes meet. I catch her gaze as she catches mine. Meaning, she and I are sharing a similar perception of time.

“Yaaah!”

As though to make the point that she doesn’t care, she swings her right fist at me. In response, I watch her movement. As I’m watching, I catch the moment where she can’t change the course of her fist.

“Sloppy.”

I sweep her leg while dodging her attack. Since she and I are moving with the same perception of time scale, she understands what I was doing. She understands, but she can't avoid it.

With her eyes widening in surprise, she rolls into her fall, at which point she then opens some distance from me. It's the right call. To the ordinary observer, it must have looked like she lunged at me at high speed, tripped before she could hit me, and then dashed off to the other side.

I'm sure Tahlan is able to follow the full exchange, and those I've been teaching seem to be able to follow along, to a certain extent.

"…Impressive. You truly are this kingdom's best."

"Do you understand why I was able to avoid your attack?"

"I don't... But I'll keep trying until I do!"

Sure enough, she resumes her attack. I decide to focus on dodging until she's satisfied. Either way, it's probably not going to last long. From the audience's point of view, no doubt they're just happy to be able to see a legendary berserker fight.

And in truth, she's absurdly fast. Given her looks, she's well suited for putting on a show. Of course, putting on a good show isn't necessarily going to lead to victory.

"No good, this isn't going anywhere! I hate to say this, but looks like there's no gaps in your defense."

"Yes, and you should think that over a bit."

She tries quite a few things. She tries attacking my legs, my torso, and my center of gravity, all while maintaining her top speed. While probably only a handful of people can see this from the stands, she's doing her best to try out different options.

After I dodge all of those attempts, she now has to change her tactics.

"Two days ago, I lost to you. Then, afterwards, I lost to that woman, Sunae."

"Yes, indeed."

"That taught me that my strength, my speed…they have limits."

Her abilities relate to her enhancement of her physical abilities along with her focus sharpening her reflexes. But of course, there are limits to both. It's not like she can accelerate without limit or infinitely increase her strength. And in those areas, she simply doesn't compare to a Spirit Summoner. No matter how talented she might be.

"And you can see my movements. Sunae could also see me, evidently, but you're able to completely avoid my attacks."

"Yes, indeed."

"Meaning that you can read me completely. You've got a complete grasp on my attacks."

Her four companions from the hidden village swallow. Why? Because what Ran says is tantamount to her admitting that she can't win. Her attacks can't hit me. And, just like two days ago, I have a technique that can

knock her out in an instant. As Ran herself understands, I can defeat her at any moment.

“And do you understand the reason now?”

“Of course. This is why, right?”

The tack she chooses to take is simple. She settles into a stance and, rather than running, she approaches slowly, shuffling her feet. That must be similar to one of the steps practiced by the martial arts that she learned, then defeated.

“Well?”

“Correct.”

She smiles with the knowledge I can no longer dodge her attacks, and that signals that she’s managed to cover one of her weaknesses. It’s a sign of growth from her as a fighter.

“And now you won’t be able to trip me.”

Up until now, her fighting style consisted of staying constantly in motion. By making use of her speed, which exceeded the reflexes of ordinary people, she vanished from her opponent’s line of sight. After which, she could then land a blow that could defeat an ordinary person. That had been her ideal tactic.

There were almost no humans that she couldn’t beat that way. And, in truth, she’d been winning up, until recently. The problem for her is an opponent who can properly grasp her movement. No matter how fast she’s able to move, it’s meaningless if her opponent can follow her. If anything, fighting while moving quickly left her vulnerable.

“It’s true that if you settle down and fight, it’s harder to sweep your feet out from under you. However... I imagine it will be difficult for you to take up a completely different style of fighting, no?”

“Do you doubt me? Then let me prove it to you using your body!”

Rather than running like the ideal track athlete, she settles her center of gravity in a regular stance and moves like a martial artist. She’s made the right choice. While the sprinting might offer a higher top speed, this is more appropriate once you know that your opponent can read when you start moving.

“Dodge this!”

The stance she chooses is somewhat close to a boxer’s stance, even though she’s not trying to measure my cadence. Because she’s trying to fight mostly with her fists, I suppose her stance naturally just takes on that form.

The punch she throws is fast and sharp. A blow thrown from long range, quickly closing the distance.

As I dodge it, she then switches to close range fighting, attempting a combination of follow-up blows. While I can move quickly for short bursts, when it comes to multiple attacks, I can’t keep up with her.

She’s certainly got the right idea. At least, it would be the right idea if this had been unarmed combat.

“There’s no need to dodge.”

She might be throwing multiple punches, but it doesn’t mean she’s grown more arms, and it’s not as though she’s going to attack with both arms at once.

I grab her arm as she throws the first punch in her attempted combination.

“Grr… Grr!”

She swings her arm wildly to break out of my hold and backs away. That, too, isn’t wrong. Since she knows of the Seeping Blood’s Bursting Venom Style, her caution is perfectly understandable.

That and that I fired a Ki Wave into her arm.

“Oh… So that’s what that is.”

She’s quick to recover, since it’s not like I rattled her head around. The Ki Wave isn’t lethal, and given her healing ability, her arm will heal quickly. In a blink of an eye, she’s fully recovered.

“Like the Bursting Venom Style, your style has a move where you only need to touch an opponent, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right. It’s called Ki Wave.”

“Two days ago, you used that move to jolt my head and knock me out.”

“That’s correct.”

She flashes a proud, predatory grin, as though to say she’s seen through my tricks.

“You must also have a way to move quickly. Combining those two things, you can always move to your opponent’s blind spot and catch them off guard. That’s your tactic.”

Sure, that’s technically true. I’ve used that combination to defeat opponents in the past. She’s one of them.

“As you say, if I restrain myself, if I wait for you to attack, it shouldn’t be a problem. You can move across a distance instantly, but it’s not like you can sustain that rapid movement. Otherwise, you would have gone along with my combo attacks.”

“As you say.”

“Still confident, huh? But, like you told me, I’ve learned how you fight just by waiting. You’re no match for me now!”

She really doesn’t think much of me, does she? She’s awfully excited just at the fact that she’s stopped running around. The truth is that her fighting style up to now was what had been unusual, and she’s now returned to a normal fighting style. It was one thing to go with running while fighting multiple opponents, but it’s not a style to adopt when fighting one on one.

“Not at all. I won’t lose yet. You make it sound easy, but to leave no openings isn’t such a simple thing to do.”

“Hrmph! You sound just as conceited as those geezers in the village!”

I hate to note this, but I’m much older than even the oldest person in that village. The only people older than me who aren’t other Immortals are probably the Eight Sacred Treasures.

“Funny that a butcher like you goes on like some holy man!”

The mood in the Coliseum immediately turns dark. It seems they’ve remembered that in terms of the number of people killed, and in sheer unnaturalness, I’m worse than she is.

“I won’t deny it. Those heads were the ones I lopped off.”

I think back to the recent incident. It’s not as though they had suffered, and the desecration of their bodies may have been just punishment for their crimes, but it’s also true that I’m in no place to give lectures after doing something on that scale.

“But, Ran, do you really get it?”

“Get what? I can tell you’re sounding less like some preacher. So, you’re showing your true colors!”

“You’re welcome to bray all you want, but you haven’t accomplished anything.”

I still have my wooden sword in my sash, and I haven’t yet attacked her. She hasn’t actually managed to land an attack on me.

“Do you really think you can beat me?”

“Of course. I’m overjoyed to fight someone as strong as you! And I’m certain now! If I can beat you, there’s no one in this world I can’t beat!”

I see. I suppose I should have killed her, after all.

I use my Flash Step to appear next to her. Then, placing my hand on her shoulder, I blast her away with a Ki Wave.

“Wha?!”

“There’s two things you’ve got wrong. First, even if you beat me, there’s still someone above you. My master, Suiboku. From his vantage point, I’m still a fledgling.”

Of course, she quickly recovers her footing. But, at the same time, she’s thoroughly surprised by my attack, and sweat beads on her brow.

“Second, you seem to think you’ve been fighting me. You haven’t managed to get me to fight you yet.”

Sansui Shirokuro is a ruthless butcher, far from a sainted Sword Apostle. Having seen the gibbetted heads, no doubt that’s what any witness would think. There’s nothing normal about a man who could kill that many people, in their minds, and that’s not that mistaken of an observation. At the very least, I won’t hesitate to kill if I think it necessary.

“Let me show you… The true freedom that only those who master themselves can manage.”

Those who can’t kill without rage, without hostile intent, without malice, without justification… I’ll show her what a true sword is like, one that’s beyond the limited horizons of warriors like those. Once achieved, true freedom takes everything else that restrains you and returns it to nothing.

“In you, you have the vision of a master and the athletic abilities of the young. No doubt you’re impossible to catch by someone restricted to moving through forms. But the same goes for me, and you can’t grasp my formless movements. As such…”

So long as the opponent is human, my blade can take them down. I'll show this girl what it means to master both the blade and the Immortal Arts.

"Because you're at a certain level of skill, you have to face the vast gulf between us, and thus fall."

I was sent out by my master after picking up Lain. Since I'd been sheltered in the woods, I hadn't known just what existed in the world. In that sense, I wasn't much different from Ran, the girl standing in front of me. But my master knew about berserkers. And yet, in spite of that, he sent me out and told me that I'd still be the strongest.

"You've always let your inner violence run wild, and as a result, you've always dismissed the martial arts, thinking that practice was meaningless. That may have been true of the arts, the fists, and the blades that you've seen until now."

The air inside the Coliseum grows heavy. The spectators tense and focus on the arena. All eyes are on Ran and I.

"You won't taste defeat. What you'll experience is a sense of powerlessness and despair."

Part 11 — Self-Control

“Self-control leads to true freedom. You simply have never understood this.”

“Stop talking gibberish!”

She tries to attack me, in order to overcome the fear she feels at my words, and toward me. The moment I make a movement to respond to her, she hurriedly stops her motion. Yes, she understands. Even if she’s faster than I am, just attacking me would end in me avoiding her attacks. Which is why she hesitates.

I’m well aware of this before I speak to her.

“What’s wrong? You’re tense.”

The brief tension that comes from halting her attack… I’m not going to miss such an obvious opening. I Flash Step next to her, and land a Ki Blow on her stomach. That simple attack sends her flying.

“Guh… This doesn’t…”

“No, I doubt it’ll leave any lasting damage. But that’s fine. That’s not the point.”

I didn’t intend to take her down. More than making a show of it, it’s to make her realize the gap in skill between us.

Of course, this is a bit sadistic, just like the gibbetting. But even if I can knock her out with a single blow, with a masterful strike, that only means that I can finish her off, not make her understand the skill gap.

“This is what happens when you have no self-control. The way you control your body is impressive. I see nothing to correct in your form when you’re running or punching.”

“Grr…”

“And in terms of stepping in to attack from a stopped stance, you did perfectly. That was the first time you tried that, yes? But it was perfect. Completely formless.”

I don’t know if it’s because she’s a berserker, or if because she’s gifted with first-rate talent among berserkers, but her body control is perfect. She has the same understanding of the human body that it took me countless years to understand. No doubt she’d be able to perfectly perform any martial art or weapon style.

“If we’re both formless, no doubt you believe that you’ll win given your superior physical abilities. However… That’s wrong. The reality is that you have no response to my skill.”

Yes, she hasn’t been able to respond to my Flash Step. Despite that I’m able to respond to her attacks, she can’t even manage to block my attacks, and takes them head on, instead.

That must be unnerving to her, because of her sheer talent. She can’t hide her panic at this situation.

“…Why? Why can’t I see you move?!”

“Self-control, as I keep telling you.”

Despite her shock, she throws up her hands in a stance. She then tries to get her agitated mind to wrap around the problem well enough to come up with a solution.

It’s futile. There’s nothing in her toolset that can resolve this situation.

“It’s about enduring, isn’t it?! What good is enduring pain?!”

“I’ll teach you. Through experience.”

Ran slowly closes the distance, but I step backward and open up space between us. The arena we’re fighting in is large, so there’s plenty of room for me to escape. As such, this is a test of wills.

“Screw you! I’m not that stupid!”

Force her to return to her old way of fighting by forcing a stalemate… She thinks that’s what I’m after. And the truth is, it is.

She plans to fight slowly. But that’s impossible.

“But you *are* stupid. You don’t understand anything.”

As a simple truth, so long as she’s in a stance, she can respond even if I suddenly appear behind her. The problem is whether or not she can stay calm enough to do so.

“Well? Can you still bear it?”

“Sh-Shut up!”

Yes, she’s enduring it. Because she’s agitated, constantly in a rage, she’s not suited to this sort of slow fighting. The fact that she could attack but won’t, that she’s not doing anything to an opponent she hates…all of those things are eating at her.

When she’s aggressively on the offensive — that is, every moment of every fight up until now — she’s never had to think about it, but she’s simply not good at being on the defensive. Her supposedly perfect body control steadily erodes under her growing tension.

“Get it now? This is what it means when I say you lack training.”

“SHUT! UP!”

No longer able to hold back, she attacks recklessly. She takes a big step in and swings at my face. No doubt she’s aware of it herself, but her punch is a mess. Her form is in tatters, and because of the unnecessary tension in her body, her attack is slower. And since she’s put her weight behind it, she’s unable to stop in mid-swing.

I step back slightly and place my own palm in front of my face. Waiting for the moment when her arm stretches out completely, I grab her hand and blast her with a Ki Wave.

“Guh!”

“Not good enough. Not nearly good enough.”

I could easily knock her out if I aimed for her head. However, when working with a body part like a fist, the most I can do is make one of her arms useless, and that only lasts for a moment. However, during that moment, she can’t move it at all. It’s far too long a moment to even call it an opening.

“You little…!”

“Why do you not retreat?”

Losing all use of one arm, even for a moment… Understanding the situation, she tries to counter-attack with her other arm. The kinetics of her body are, in and of itself, correct. Even as I grasp one arm, her form is nearly perfect.

But it’s all wrong. She should be pulling back, not attacking. Since I’m just holding her fist, if she pulled back, I’d have to let go. But, in spite of that, she chooses to counter-attack anyway.

Meaning, what’s wrong with her is not with how she’s moving, but what she’s deciding to do in the first place.

“Your arm is useless. With that being the case, you should first pull back and regroup.”

I use my Feather Step to lighten Ran’s body. Then, I twist the fist I’m holding, putting her joint in a hold as I pull her. That’s all I need to do to lift her body up in the air.

“Wha?!”

It’s as though I’m throwing a featherweight doll with joints. If anything, the fact that she has joints makes it easier to throw her. I turn her head toward the ground and release the Feather Step, dropping her toward the ground.

She’s not going to land on her head, of course; that would be pathetic. Using the arm she can still move, she rolls into a landing and protects her head. In the blink of an eye, she goes from looking as though she’s doing one-armed push-ups to sweeping my arm aside and standing up.

“Do you understand now? You may think you’ve got complete control of your body, but in reality, the only thing you’re able to do is attack. Your immaturity is constraining you.”

This is what it means to lack self-control. As a berserker, her physical abilities and body control are perfect, but because she’s a berserker, she can’t make any choice other than to attack, the worst possible way to narrow one’s options. There are things she can’t do, and there are things she can’t help but do. It’s an extremely obvious weakness and a perfect opening.

“Because you lack self-control, you can’t wait. Even if you try to wait, you get impatient and your body tenses. You can’t retreat when you must, and so your actions are constrained.”

“Dammit… DAMMIT!”

She understands this all too well. She understands, but she can’t do anything about it. That she can’t is a sign of her immaturity.

“You’re a berserker. That’s all you are. You have nothing else.”

I suspect every other berserker up to now was the same way. Taking the same measures I’ve used on Ran would likely result in the same results against any other berserker. How lacking in individuality. How hopelessly constrained. How mundane.

“You have no training to fall back on, no ideal to serve as your goal, no motivation, no principles, no creativity. All you’ve done is rely on your talent and cling to it like a crutch.”

“Wh-What’s your damned point?!”

“You’re dull, uninteresting, pointless, and boring.”

Even wild animals put a lot more effort into living. This girl is a spoiled child who’s never had to struggle or overcome anything.

“…!”

“Angry? But the reason you won’t attack is because you don’t feel you can hit me. The reason you keep listening to my lecture is because you can’t deny what I’m saying.”

That was likely her reason for living. Her life had nothing to do with effort. It’s not like she had any particular goal, nor was she putting in her best effort. She never thought of how she should use her strength, nor had she ever thought about how she should fight.

The fact that she was stronger than people who had goals and worked toward them must have been a source of pride for her. Conversely, that must have been a terrible thing for those around her to deal with.

However, once faced with an understanding of her own limitations, she has nothing she can do but stick her head in the sand.

“Why can’t I deal with your attacks… Is that also self-control?”

“Correct. I’m in control of myself. No matter what I feel about you, I can act as I please. I can always choose the best course of action. Unlike you.”

I spent so much time… Unlike her, I spent unimaginable amounts of time learning how to control my own body completely. From there, I spent an even longer amount of time mastering the ability to maintain that control at any time, in any place.

“You simply haven’t put in enough training, Ran. You’ve put in so little training that it’s hopeless. It shows in the fact that you think yourself the strongest despite having so little strength. You’re so immature that it’s almost amusing.”

I almost envy her ability to be satisfied merely with this level of skill. I’m still not satisfied. I can only see shortcomings when I look at myself. Someday, when I’ve watched Lain go off and live on her own, when I finish my days in the mortal world and return to the woods, then I’ll have much to learn from my master again.

“No living thing is guaranteed to be alive tomorrow. There’s no reason you or I couldn’t die this very second. You, in particular. Now… Up till today, you’ve gorged on victory, drunk on power. Ran of the Tempera Village, would you have no regrets if you were to die now?”

Death is what waits beyond defeat. Alternatively, it’s something the strong push upon the weak. In that case, she’s probably never even thought that she could really die. To her, ‘the strong’ meant herself, ‘the weak’ everyone else. She probably can’t understand what it means to lose.

“When I fought you, when I fought all of you, two days ago, I didn’t kill you. Frankly, I regret that now.”

I thought there was no reason to kill her. I couldn’t see any reason that I had to go that far. However, it turns out that I’d drawn the wrong conclusions.

“If I had killed you, Sunae… Princess Sunae wouldn’t have gotten hurt. It’s true that she had the advantage, but fighting you could have resulted in serious injury. And you could have fought others, leaving them hurt, for no reason.”

Because I hadn’t killed her and just beat her, everyone began to think it was fine to leave her alive. It’s true that I could deal with her easily, but I’m the only one who can. Anyone else likely would have been killed. Even if they hadn’t died, they could have suffered at her hands.

It’s a disappointing lack of foresight. It should have been obvious that she was in a state of agitated excitement, but because I was still thinking about the beheadings, I decided not to kill her.

“I exposed a lot of people to danger because I didn’t kill you. Because I didn’t kill you, countless people thought you didn’t need to be killed.”

Of course, it’s the height of arrogance to want to live without being resented by anyone. But even putting that aside, Ran wasn’t normal. The truth was that she was always in a state of agitation. Leaving her alone in spite of that was indefensible.

“My thoughtless decision made everyone underestimate your danger. The fact that I’ve thoroughly humiliated you this time will probably make this worse. Despite the fact that if you wanted to, you could kill just about anyone short of myself or Sai…Lord Saiga.”

And that’s probably true of Shouzo, as well. He could destroy the world whenever he wanted. What’s different is that he’s restrained himself. He’s capable of self-control.

The question with Ran is whether or not she’s even capable of doing so. Because of her nature, she flies into a rage extremely easily. Indeed, that frenzied rage was her usual state.

“What do you want, Ran the Berserker? To merely have talent, to be the demon spawn that brings nothing but chaos to this world?”

“What do I…want?”

“If you’re drunk on the logic of ‘might makes right’…then, as your superior, I will erase you. If you’re drunk on your own power and want to show it off to the world, I will smite you before you can spread your destruction any further.”

I’m not God. If she’s not where I can keep an eye on her, I can’t tell what she’s doing. Even if I did, it would take me time to identify where she’s gone on a rampage, and I can do nothing about people who are hurt or lives that are lost.

“Well, that is… Do you have any last words?”

No life in this world can simply be dismissed. But, at the same time, there is no living thing that won't eventually die. All lives are precious, and everyone tried to cling to the things that mattered to them.

"You see, I'm not that smart. I thought at first it would be fine to let you live, but when I think about it, you could have very well killed everyone there."

I have priorities. If she were to go on a rampage, the people first in danger would be the people at the Academy. Those people would die at the hands of someone who I hadn't killed, despite that person being an obvious danger.

"I don't want that. I have emotions enough to be repulsed by that thought."

"Don't kill her if you don't have to." Those are Lady Douve's orders. But if I decide she must die, then Lady Douve will likely forgive me.

"From your point of view, the weak might well be worthless, but the people there are honest and hardworking. I want to make them stronger. Of course, it'd be perfectly natural for them to die in combat, and I can't stop all of them from getting killed. But... I'd still regret it if they died by your hand when I had no reason not to kill you."

To her, they have no value. To society writ large, they have no value. Even from their point of view, they probably don't think they have much worth, themselves.

And of course, for me, in terms of priorities, they're not that high up. However, at the bare minimum, they're more valuable than the berserker in front of me.

"Am I...going to die?"

"Yes, you're going to die. Just as you've acted on a whim all your life, due to your strength, I'm going to kill you on a whim, too. Don't want to die?"

My affect is flat. I doubt my emotions show on my features, either. This is what it means to be free.

"I...!"

"I don't know if you can even learn self-control. It's possible you'll be able to do it. But, frankly, I'm not interested. If you fail, rather than regret not killing you when I could... I'd rather kill you now and have closure."

In a sense, it's probably the same logic as the king's when he didn't put a stop to Ukyou's killing spree. You can't tell what they'd do if they were alive. And, while it's possible they wouldn't do anything, they don't have enough value to pin one's hopes on that. That's what I feel about Ran right now.

"I... I...!"

She's still in an agitated state. Her silver hair wavers. In front of her is a man she hates, me.

Fear of death, the humiliation of defeat, discontent at her lack of freedom... All of those things are likely to make her act rashly.

I've drawn my wooden sword from my hip. This is the knife's edge. No matter how she moves, I can kill her.

I can see her struggling with herself. It's more than enough to make her slip up with her body control.

And, of course, I'm aware of my entire surroundings. Everyone in the Coliseum is holding their breath, waiting for my judgment.

Maybe they just wanted to watch a berserker fight.

Maybe they just wanted to confirm that I was strong as everyone says.

Maybe they just came because a friend invited them.

But everyone present was at my mercy.

"I…!"

Who in the Coliseum could see Ran's tears? I could, of course. I'm facing off with her.

"I…!"

In her state of agitation, she probably can't control her emotions. If she wants to cry, she probably can't help but bawl. And, of course, that's probably to be expected of a girl her age.

"I…!"

"And even if I didn't kill you… If, as a result, you did something and I was to regret it… Even then, it's not right of me to make the call myself."

I place my sword back on my hip.

"I am Lady Douve's sword. I will cut down only those who Lady Douve orders me to kill. That is why I can't kill you based on my own selfish reasons."

After intimidating her like this, I can finally afford not to kill her. Unlike earlier, many people have thoughts regarding her. That is why I shouldn't kill her.

I turn my back to her and leave the arena. I, of course, am returning to Lady Douve and Blois. Behind me, I feel the presence of multiple people.

"Ran, are you okay?!"

"Your head still on there?!"

"It's not one of those things where it's actually cut off and it falls over when you move, right?!"

"You better check!"

As she sobs, her companions come to reassure her. It's almost farcical. But, still, the fact that I humiliated her must please Lady Douve.

I was able to drive home the point to Ran, it was probably a good lesson for my students, and the spectators are probably pleased at seeing me fight a berserker, so on the whole, it'll probably turn out fine.

This is the most I can manage.

Sigh. If I'd just killed her earlier, I wouldn't have had to bother with all this.

"Yes, I still need more training."

Part 12 — Out of Control

“He’s still ridiculous.”

The only way to describe the outcome was that it conclusively demonstrated the sheer gap in ability between Ran and Sansui. As Happine notes, the result was so one-sided that those who came to gape at the berserker ended up pitying her.

The two sword masters who accompany House Sepaeda’s spoiled princess as her bodyguards… One of them is rather famous in certain circles due to how much he stands out, but it’s also true that, just as often, there were times when his name wasn’t mentioned in public because the incidents he was involved with were simply too important to be talked about.

Recently, four men have been talked about as being the aces of the Four Great Houses. Among them, one of them has gained infamy as being invincible, so long as he had a sword in his hand.

With his name attached, and the recent borderline-ridiculous incident with the heads lined up on boards, combined with rumors of a berserker being in custody, brought a flood of well-heeled spectators from the capital. They leave with all their bloodlust drained from them.

‘Well, why don’t we go look at just how dangerous the captured berserker actually is?’ ‘You know, it’s probably worth a look at the Young Sword Apostle’s boring face.’ ‘If the show’s boring, I can jump in and defeat both of them.’ The spectators completely abandoned those thoughts as they left.

It was clear to everyone who watched that she was a real berserker, and that the berserker had been thoroughly beaten down by the all too real sword apostle. Sansui’s strength was so ludicrous that the spectators left exhausted, as though all of them had experienced exactly what Ran did when Sansui had his sword to her throat. To put it briefly, they all felt a certain relief, a sense that they’d barely made it out with their lives.

“He really is a monster.”

Ran and the four others are currently staying at the Batterabbe Estate. In the room they’ve been given, the Batterabbe party and the Tempera party are having a chat. Seems the shared experience of challenging, then being demolished by Sansui has brought them together.

As for Tahlan, he’s off sparring with the other spectators. It seems that he also felt something in the battle and needs to get it out of his system.

“So, what are you planning to do now?”

Sansui is in favor of killing Ran, and he knows that only he and Saiga can do it. Or rather, it’s because she’s so powerful that he thinks she ought to be killed. On that point, no one can really refute him. The truth is that it’d be natural for him to do so, and that there’d be nothing wrong with it.

“I don’t know… Just what was that…?” Ran lets out, after a troubled pause.

She understands how she lost the first fight. He circled into her flank using Flash Step, then knocked her out with a Ki Wave. He demonstrated the same set of moves repeatedly during the most recent fight, as though to hammer home the point.

The problem is that, even knowing the mechanics, she can’t come up with a single way to deal with it. It’s something she’s never experienced before.

“I didn’t feel like I was fighting a human being… Just what was I fighting?”

Her hair is still silver. In spite of this, it’s fear, rather than excitement, that drives her. She felt that she’d just fought a monster wearing the skin of a human being. Ordinarily, that’s a description that best fits berserkers, but she just couldn’t think of Sansui as human.

“The man who decimated your village two thousand years ago… Sansui is his apprentice.”

Happine’s words had a certain resignation to them. Sansui took down a berserker as though he were facing children. No wonder they couldn’t beat him.

“Impossible! I don’t know how else to put it, but… Is that girl who turns into a sword telling the truth?”

The Temperans can’t hide their confusion. They used to be so sure that there couldn’t be people like Sansui out in the world. The Batterabbe party can’t help but feel a certain nostalgia at their reaction.

“I am the Legendary Sword Eckesachs. I am not a girl who turns into a sword, but a sword created by God and masquerading as a human being. I am several thousand years old. My current wielder is Saiga there, but my previous wielder was Sansui’s master, Suiboku.”

Eckesachs couldn’t hide her exasperation, even as she described the situation. No doubt that Suiboku trained his apprentice after having all of the realizations he came to after going their separate ways, but there’s a limit to even that.

“Suiboku and Sansui are Immortals who have the power of Ki, and by training in deep woods or mountains, they gain an unaging body. So far as I know myself, Suiboku has lived for twenty-five hundred years, while his apprentice is at least five hundred years old. Of course, ordinary Immortals aren’t so fixated on swordplay, apparently.”

The ‘apparently’ is because she herself has never met an ‘ordinary’ Immortal. She may have existed for several millennia, but she’s a Sacred Treasure meant for combat, and there’s no reason for her to interact with Immortals who don’t fight.

“To put it bluntly, Suiboku was the ultimate swordsman. He defeated your ancestors, and it’s no exaggeration to say that he traveled the entire world in search of opponents. He fought against the wielders of the Sacred

Treasures and cut down all of them. And, of course, he fought the Marked and never lost."

To her, those were the glory days. Eckesachs recounts them with a contented expression.

"As such, he truly was the greatest warrior in the world. He fought countless people across these lands, and proved that there wasn't a single one able to challenge him. Sansui is the man that this Suiboku then trained for five hundred years and sent out to the mortal world as worthy of being considered the greatest. Sansui himself isn't much different from you lot, a boy with no knowledge of the wider world, but Suiboku knows what the world holds. Whether Sansui could beat Suiboku is an open question, but for the only one stronger than Sansui…is likely Suiboku himself."

A true warrior, the ultimate warrior. The greatest, not just of this kingdom, but perhaps closer to the greatest in this entire world. Maybe it wasn't possible to win against that sort of ridiculous opponent.

"Just so we're clear, Saiga's pretty ridiculous, too! You better not underestimate him!"

Happine defends Saiga's honor. However, she doesn't say that Saiga could defeat Sansui.

"So, just to double check. What is it you want to do? If you just want to fight strong opponents, then you've already gotten your wish, yes? What do you want to do afterwards?"

Sansui is strong. So strong that he can easily defeat the girl in front of Happine, and make her admit defeat, without killing her. Further, he doesn't age. As such, age won't dull his abilities, even as time goes on. In fact, Ran will grow old before he ever does. So long as Ran is near Sansui, she can't go on a rampage and come out alive.

"I…"

"Just so we're clear, Sansui's built up quite a bit of trust over the years. If Sansui says that we should kill a berserker — that is, you — I'd need to have a really solid foundation to work from in order to oppose it."

At the very least, if she doesn't plan to learn self-control, then there's no other choice but to kill her. That's because Ran is simply too dangerous in her excited state. Unless she intends to control herself, she won't stop.

"Even *I'm* not…*that* charitable. If you plan to stay the way you are, I won't defend you. No matter what anyone else says."

She just wouldn't be worth it. She probably means it. Happine doesn't want to keep her alive that badly.

"In truth, you yourself probably think you can't complain if someone wants to kill you, right?"

Ran flinches, trembling at those words. In her excited state, the swings in her emotions seem more pronounced. She had no intention of being killed. In fact, she intended to be the one doing all the killing. But that means that she can't complain if she's killed.

"…Yes."

“Honestly, leaving you to your own devices is dangerous, and we can’t send you back to your village. Therefore, there are two choices — you either learn self-control, or you die.”

There’s no way that Ran could escape her fate. Once Sansui decides she needs to be taken care of, her death is a certainty.

“…I’ll be honest. I’d prefer that you cooperate.” After some hesitation, Saiga addresses Ran directly. His eyes glint with steely determination.

“I’m not embarrassed to admit it. I need your help to become stronger.”

With that, Saiga tenses. His face turns red with effort as he strains every muscle in his body. Those in the room can’t understand what he’s doing. Everyone that is, except for Ran.

“Wha…?”

While the Temperans were ignorant of magic, and therefore didn’t know about the Rare Arts, there’s one thing that they know for certain. That is, to learn a martial art, you had to have the gift specific to that art, and that every person was born with a single gift. Since Saiga had created those walls, there’s no way he could do the same thing she does…

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

As he lets out a shout, his hair begins to turn silver from the roots upward.

“How’s that!”

Saiga, with his emotions heightened at having become a berserker, begins talking at an incredible clip as the others in the room stare in surprise.

“I can’t explain it very well! But I can use lots of magics, lots of martial arts! Which is why I’m treated as House Batterabbe’s ace! But I’m still really, really weak! I couldn’t do anything against Sansui, even though I have the ultimate legendary sword! And I’ve honestly been struggling with this! Right now I can’t even beat people who fly! Just because they’re flying!”

He can’t very well go on a rampage, but the words come flooding out of him as though he’s drunk.

“It was a really big shock to me! I mean, all they were doing was flying! I’m sure it’s impressive, but it’s not that rare! But despite the fact that I’m fighting them with the legendary sword! I couldn’t beat the enemies that were flying! And then Sansui’s girlfriend just goes and takes them out like it’s nothing! It was really, really embarrassing!”

“Uh—Right…”

“So I thought maybe I should learn to fly first! Because screw it if I’m just going to sit on the ground and watch when flying enemies showed up again! Which is why I was going to practice flying! But then you show up and the Regent decides to hoist some random homework on me! But then Sunae goes ahead and beats you! And Eckesachs won’t pick me to fight you, either!”

“O-Okay…”

Saiga continues honestly spilling his guts. The others, all being women, aren't sure how to stop him.

"It's REALLY frustrating! You understand that, right?! I'm really quite awesome, I'm supposed to be awesome! But unlike Sansui no one depends on me for anything! That just sucks! I have all these powers to do stuff, but I can't even take down bad guys that are flying! By a bunch of redshirts whose only ability is to fly!"

"S-Sure..."

"Which is why I want your help! I need you! I want your powers as a berserker, as a Marked, I want that power for myself!"

"Y-Yeah..."

"I'm not going to be picky about methods anymore! Even Sansui told me to acquire new powers if I thought I needed them! And if I let you go, I won't be able to learn berserker powers from anyone anyway!"

Saiga uses the power of a berserker to corner Ran. He grabs Ran's shoulders and shakes her. Although they're both berserkers, in Ran's depressed state, she's no match for Saiga's enthusiasm.

"L-Lord Saiga! Please turn off your berserker powers!"

"Which is why... Whoa!"

Saiga's arms begin turning to stone. This is because Saiga, despite hearing Zuger's words, refused to stop, and so the curse kicked in, instead.

"R-Right! I got it! I'm going to calm the Tainted Blood."

Sansui had pointed it out as well, but in an excited state, it's hard to exercise self-restraint, which means an external safety valve is necessary. Thus, House Seive's Hex Arts, which can transform a person based on an agreement with the caster. With the physical restraints from that agreement kicking in, Saiga settles to the floor, arms still petrified.

"...Phew..."

Settled on the ground, he begins to focus. Saiga's hair slowly returns to normal. It goes from its burning silver to black. Simultaneously, his arms turn from stone to flesh.

"Thank you, Zuger."

"Not at all... It seemed you were a bit more excitable than before?"

"Probably because seeing Sansui demonstrate his strength brought a lot of things back to the surface... I mean, he's pretty awesome to watch."

His excitement fades and Saiga regains his calm. Everyone around him can't shake their surprise at the change. At the same time, they were also surprised that he had managed to restrain himself.

"But I still want to learn from an expert. I feel bad about relying on Sansui for everything."

"An expert... Me?"

"Yeah... Guess it's obvious, but becoming a berserker really makes me stronger. But... It's hard to exercise any self-control. Frankly, it's enough to make it impossible to use Eckesachs..."

Saiga is good at learning the basics, but there are limits. As it is, when becoming a Marked, just starting the basics puts you in a heightened emotional state.

“Of course that’s the case. An agitated human can’t very well use a sword properly. It’s one thing if they were as skilled as Tahlan, but you’ve got decades of training before you reach that level.”

“Guh…”

“But to approach it from a different angle, if you can get used to the excited state, and be able to control yourself, you’ll likely become much stronger. It won’t do much against flying enemies, but in the worst case, you can always throw rocks at them.”

Saiga still can’t do much against flying opponents, but that’s a problem to tackle later. It’s possible he might very well find a Rare Art that lets him fly very easily.

“There are many who can fly, but there’s only one berserker here. And since you’re not an Immortal, it’s an open question of whether you’ll see another in your lifetime. In that sense, your priorities aren’t misplaced.”

“I first thought that maybe I can teach this to someone, but… I couldn’t. I only learned once I could actually become a berserker that it’s really hard to restrain myself… At the very least, I can’t teach anyone until I can learn to control it myself. It’s too dangerous. Which is why I want to be able to control it. Help me learn it.”

He puts his own desires right out there, with no intention of hiding them. He wants to learn as much as he can from Ran, first and foremost for himself. It’s a very easy thing to understand.

“You must know that I can’t teach you self-control… I don’t know how to do it, either!”

“That’s fine, let’s learn it together. You don’t want to die, right? You want to keep living. That’s the same for me.”

If Happine found herself empathizing with Ran’s four companions, Saiga found himself empathizing with Ran herself.

“You have no training to fall back on, no ideal to serve as your goal, no motivation, no principles, no creativity. All you’ve done is rely on your talent and cling to it like a crutch.”

“You’re dull, uninteresting, pointless, and boring.”

“No living thing is guaranteed to be alive tomorrow. There’s no reason you or I can’t die this very second. You in particular. Now… Up till today you’ve gorged on victory, drunk on power. Ran of the Tempera Village, if you were to die now, would you have no regrets?”

Those words, after all, apply to him, as well.

“Would I be content if I died today?”

Sansui and Suiboku would be fine if death claimed them today. They’ve dedicated their lives to what they loved, as much as they could hope to do, and they’d die without regrets.

But these two aren’t like that. At the very least, they haven’t had something to dedicate their overflowing strength toward mastering. They’ve never accomplished anything by making use of every last ounce of their ability. They didn’t want to die while Sansui could justly declare that they’d never done anything of value.

“No, I don’t... I! I! I can’t die yet! I want to live!”

The words after ‘I’ that couldn’t come out during the fight come flowing out without shame. She’d been constrained by the worthless pride she’d accumulated through her fights before she arrived in these lands. She was finally free again. Free to shout what she wanted.

“I can’t just let it end like this! I couldn’t offer any resistance as I was beaten! I’m going to show him I can be better!”

She had been strong from the moment she had been born. In truth, she had never lost or even struggled. She had never felt constrained or that she lacked power. Having now experienced those emotions firsthand, she shouted her renewed desire to become stronger.

Part 13 — Breaking Free

After witnessing Sansui and Ran's public duel, Sansui's students are now thoroughly engrossed in their sparring. Each of them wanted to absorb as much insight as they could glean from what their master had proved possible in the duel. Some were tirelessly practicing their swings, others were engaged in spirited sparring using the cloth-wrapped practice swords, and yet others were attempting to copy Sansui's movements.

Sansui watches over their practice, because he understands that they've managed to grasp something from watching him fight.

"Quite enthusiastic, aren't they? You have a lively salle, Sansui."

"Indeed, that's a very good thing."

The Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda gives his verdict as he stands next to Sansui. Sansui responds for form's sake, but there's no conviction in his words. Of course, it's better than a lack of motivation, but too much enthusiasm can also lead to a lack of consistency.

The ideal in swordplay is to consistently maintain oneself at all times. Regardless of whether there's an upcoming match, an upcoming war, or anything else, they need to be able to maintain the same level of training. That's what it means to constantly be ready for battle. But, at the same time, he didn't want to say something like that and dampen their enthusiasm.

"…Well done." The Lord Emeritus briefly gives praise to his retainer.

At the very least, he needn't have done more, and further restraint wouldn't have worked particularly well, either. In spite of it being a task he didn't relish, he did his best, and made those around him recognize his efforts as such. Even if Ran were to go on a rampage after that, that wouldn't be Sansui's responsibility or House Sepaeda's.

"You honor me."

The words are enough. Sansui finds contentment in the fact that there's one man who understands his intentions, and in the fact that the man in question is his master.

"So, what is your actual read on the situation? Just how strong has that girl become?"

"She's now able to fight with tactics in mind, and that's an enormous step forward. I doubt Spirit Summoning can stop her now."

In her duel with Sansui, Ran was shown her limits quite thoroughly. As such, she's now aware of just how much self-control, the thing she lacks, can alter the outcome of a battle. Just with that, she's gone from a mere beast to something closer to human. As Sansui demonstrated, self-control makes for a vast improvement in combat ability.

"But even then, I can defeat her at your command."

An absolute confidence that comes from understanding his own limits… His words are full of certainty, and there's not a shred of doubt clouding

them. He can kill her whenever he wishes. No matter how strong she becomes, she's not a match for him.

"I see… Those are words every man wants to utter at some point, I think."

The Lord Emeritus's words are tinged with envy. Just as Sansui has warned, berserkers are, in fact, extremely dangerous. They've appeared on the scene several times throughout history, and each time they were stopped only after taking an immense amount of damage.

But Sansui was able to take a figure like that, thoroughly humiliate and humble her, and convince her of the error of her ways. He taught her just how deep the chasm in ability was between them, and showed her her place. As a warrior, it's difficult not to be envious of that.

"And what of your students? It would seem your duel was a good source of motivation."

"Indeed. Whatever else she is, she's quite showy. Since they were able to observe her movements to some extent, I'm sure there's plenty for them to learn from it."

In terms of absolute strength, Ran is the most powerful opponent Sansui has ever fought. At the very least, she's the only one who's approached Sansui's own level of speed. Her sheer strength helped to reveal just what differentiated Sansui from the rest. That is, she helped illustrate just how difficult and important the things Sansui has been teaching, day in and day out, are in battle.

"…Did you maintain an awareness of your own apprentices during that duel?"

"If, for example, someone attacked Lady Douve during the match, I would have been able to stop them. The fact that I could do that is why I chose to accept the duel in the first place."

At the Lord Emeritus's question, Sansui answers nonchalantly. But the words show just how absurdly strong he is.

"Ran was very focused during the match. But that means that all of her senses were focused on each and every motion I made. That is what made her reactions against me slower when I suddenly vanished from her line of sight."

The realm of the man who, when viewed from the perspective of simple human beings, was near Suiboku himself. It was a realm of skill that was much further away than anyone could imagine. Hearing those words, the Lord Emeritus couldn't help but shudder at just what this man and his master sought to accomplish. In a sense it was inevitable that one merely gifted with immense talent wouldn't stand a chance against this monster.

"They call it missing the forest for the trees. It's true in anything, but the more accomplished a person is, the wider their perspective. The more skill they have, the more information they can process before they act. In that sense, her skill was negligible. Simply put, she wouldn't be able to respond if someone sought to attack her from afar."

Because she was focused too much on what was in front of her, she neglected her surroundings. That's the reasoning, and it's something that's often brought up in war. There's nothing unusual or strange about what he's saying; it's all very ordinary. But the level from which he describes it is simply far beyond what anyone else can grasp.

"She has much, much further to grow."

Optimizing movement, concentration, enhancing physical abilities… To be able to move in the formless manner of a master with the speed of a beast. From Sansui's point of view, that's merely something that can be accomplished with training. It's something he's managed to do himself.

If the only thing that's making that possible for her is her Rare Art, there's nothing to look forward to with her. Her regenerating abilities are meaningless. Just crush her head and be done with it.

"Then, what about Tahlan?"

"He hasn't shown dramatic growth, but he's slowly gaining strength."

Hearing those words, the Lord Emeritus scans the crowd for Tahlan and, having found him, he was shocked at the sheer presence evident in the young man.

All of the swordsmen being trained by Sansui are at a level that can be described as skilled. Those swordsmen have collapsed on the ground, each in groups of ten. Tahlan, the one who accomplished this feat, visibly radiates heat.

"He's currently doing very well. He sees the examples, gains motivation from them, and his concentration improves. Once he's grasped the foundations, no doubt he'll be able to do it in training. He's not yet at a level where he can do it in combat."

Battles between those who read timing… Having seen these exchanges countless times, he appears to have grasped something. He's starting to understand, through experience, what ordinary training is there to accomplish. He's starting to make timing his own. As such, he's starting to approach Sansui's level.

"As I noted earlier, if it can't be done under all circumstances, they still haven't put in enough training."

Those facing that Tahlan dust themselves off and challenge him again. They, too, want to try to actually demonstrate the thing they've grasped through observation. They feel a faint irritation at the fact that their bodies don't quite respond the way they want them to, but they fight their way through that frustration to continue their training.

Their focus on swordsmanship clears their minds of any unnecessary thoughts. Even if, from Sansui's point of view, they're still beginners, as they can only accomplish things when free of distractions, they are also still learning and growing.

"Then… What sort of training are you going to do with that berserker?"

"Oh, no, her training would be beyond my skills as a teacher. I intend to leave her in Lord Saiga's care."

As an Immortal who has Ki, Sansui wouldn't be able to teach anything useful to Ran, a berserker with the Tainted Blood. She needs to first gain control of her talent as a martial art. Saiga's the only one who could even consider doing that.

"She first needs to learn patience. Doing unfamiliar things can mean frustration, but that's exactly why she needs to become familiar with them. Then, she needs to learn how to fight without becoming a berserker, then learn how to make judgments while fighting as a berserker. The only one who can do that with her is Saiga."

Saiga isn't here at the moment. No doubt he's off wooing Ran right now. She needs Saiga to aim higher, and that effort would be a boon to Saiga as well.

"There is no reason to worry. Lord Saiga already has the power to defeat me. Right now, he should be able to restrain Ran, even if it might take a bit of effort."

"If you say so. Honestly, he doesn't seem to be at that level to me."

"He has Eckesachs with him. Her experience with combat exceeds even my master's. Bearing that in mind, there should be no cause for concern."

Ran herself isn't the sort to rely on sneak attacks. In that sense, she's an opponent Saiga can deal with.

"If there's any role for me, it'd be after that. There are several here who have the Tainted Blood."

"...I see. Not unexpected."

"Yes, it's to be expected that, among those who can't use magic, there are a few with the Tainted Blood."

Of course, there are also those who have the Seeping Blood for the Bursting Venom Style, the Inebriated Blood for the Drunken Fist Style, the Orb Blood for the Four Vessels Style, and the Illusion Blood for the Mist Shadow Style.

Just as Sansui wields his Ki Wave, there's probably meaning for them in picking up their Arts to complement their fighting. Whether they do or not depends on just how difficult it is to learn, and just how much the individual wants to learn.

"Still, it's true that I'm worried about making compromises. While they're likely to try to learn self-control if they use me as their goal, it's also true that she's nearly unbeatable otherwise. There's no need to learn self-control. The scale is one thing, but it'll mean a lot of berserkers. Which is why, honestly, I think it's dangerous."

"Your concerns are understandable. But you were also right not to kill that girl on your own judgment. Even if there is a problem stemming from that, the responsibility is on us for not ordering you to kill her, not with your immaturity."

He reassures the man who just happens to be in the mortal world by proclaiming he'll take responsibility. This kingdom, after all, is theirs, and if something happens, the fault isn't with Sansui.

“But having actually seen a berserker, it’s hard not to want that power. Even if they’re inferior copies of that girl, there’s something attractive about that superhuman strength. That’s what it means to be a martial house.”

Sansui’s concerns are understandable, and if his worries come to pass, it would mean the loss of many lives. But whatever Sansui may think of that, now is the only opportunity for them. Just by sheer coincidence, there’s an Immortal present who has complete control of himself, and a berserker who can only be restrained by him. There’s no way they can afford to give up the opportunity they have to add the power of berserkers to the kingdom’s arsenal.

“Even if there’s a risk, the reward is worth the gamble. After all, that is what militaries are for in the first place. The difference is a matter of degree. Ignoring that and pretending it isn’t an issue is no way to govern a country.”

“…I admire your ability to view the big picture.”

Wanting to make berserkers into a part of the military, wanting to satisfy that desire… If it’s in the pursuit of that, they’re willing to brave the dangers and welcome them in. It’s not that they don’t value the lives of the people, it’s that they’re trying to come face to face with the risks for the benefit of their country. Which is why they’re here. Sansui felt respect for his own master.

“Of course, if berserkers end up being unreasonably dangerous, then there’s no need to institutionalize them. If we come to that conclusion, we will get Batterabbe’s permission and deploy you, even if they don’t have any victims. For that, leave the judgment up to us. Of course, I doubt we’ll have to give that order.”

“I appreciate your words, my lord.”

“…We put our faith in you. No doubt it’s a burden, but that is why we don’t intend to dismiss your concerns. What we ask is that you believe in us in return.”

As they talk, Tahlan prepares to break free. The man, described as peerless in his homeland, is facing his own limits directly, which is why his experiences to date are supporting him through all of this. Because his days in his homeland weren’t simple or meaningless, he understands timing, and can act within that framework.

Even if given the opportunity, the only ones who can take advantage of those opportunities are those who’ve lived meaningful days until that point. Landing a blow against a berserker who’s faster than he is… He’s approaching the realm where he can do this.

“It’s fulfilling to watch an apprentice’s growth.”

“…It is, is it?”

Part 14 — Suspicion

“Graaaaaaah!”

“Haaaaaaah!”

Saiga and Ran began by fighting in their berserker state. Both are unarmed and do nothing but exchange blows. They’re both moving at a speed that lets them read their opponent’s timing, which is why they’re able to engage in an equal exchange.

“Got you!”

“Not yet!”

Of course, Saiga doesn’t have Ran’s talent as a berserker. However, he does have other powers that he’s accumulated up to this point. He armors himself with the Mystic Arts, enhances his physical abilities with Spirit Summoning, and uses his precognition to read Ran’s attacks.

Ran herself has been living in the world of Timing since birth. Like Sansui, she can actually react and alter her movements as Saiga reacts based on his precognition.

However, Saiga can now respond to shifts in the futures he sees. They’re standing in place as they exchange blows, but there’s a proper battle between the pair as they exchange blows and defend against each other’s attacks.

As such, it’s not like a battle against a Spirit Summoner, where there’s a huge gap in mass, nor is it a battle against an Immortal, with their far greater skill. It’s an almost even battle between the two.

“U-Um… Can I stop them now?”

“No, I’ll be the judge of that, so you stay put.”

For those watching the battle, they have to stand by as they witness a bloody battle between berserkers. Zuger, who is tasked with restraining both of them through her Hex Arts, can’t afford to faint, but she’d definitely like to stop them as quickly as possible. That’s just how tense it is to watch this battle. At a glance, both of them seem to be in a frenzied bloodlust.

“As I noted earlier, first, they need to use up their power without getting hurt. Sansui is about the only one who can do that, but he believes Ran should be killed. So, we can’t very well leave it to a man with that opinion. In which case…to have my master get used to being in his Marked state, that sort of exchange is perhaps most desirable.”

They’re both in an extremely heightened emotional state and, for better or worse, are completely fixated on the other. They seem to be enjoying themselves quite a bit as they trade full-strength blows. Despite their frenzied expressions, they’re also each properly defending against the other’s attacks.

While their movements are those of a berserker, they’ve still yet to land a clean hit on the other. Understandable, given that if the balance were to tilt to one side, the exchange would end then and there.

No doubt the one leading would force down the other in their frenzy, take a mount position and continue pummeling them. Because they know that's what would happen, they're carefully guarding against each blow.

"Besides...if the training is nothing but struggle, the spirit eventually wears out. Time handles it for Immortals, but they don't have that luxury, so they need some time to enjoy some horseplay."

Sunae couldn't help but feel frustration at the display. It isn't that she didn't want this to happen. It's in fact good to see her man seeking greater heights.

But, to put it simply, Ran has now ascended to a level where Sunae can't beat her. And... Sunae couldn't hope to come anywhere close to beating Saiga, at present. That was frustrating for her.

"The man I fell in love with is getting stronger... That's a reason to celebrate, but it's a bit lonely. It feels as though he's going somewhere I can't follow."

"...Better than him moping around."

Happine can't agree with Sunae's complaint. That's because, in a sense, she has never been Saiga's equal. She's not exactly pleased that he's having fun with another woman, but at least he seems to be enjoying himself. That's very important.

"...He's brawling with Ran."

"Wow..."

"So this is this kingdom's ace."

"They look like they're having fun."

The Temperans are also watching the fight with both surprise and joy. In a sense, this might be the sight they had most wanted to see: the overwhelmingly strong Ran finding an equal and clashing with them. They were happy to see that.

"Of course, it might take a while, because they're not healing their wounds as they fight, but that's probably for the best. It goes without saying, but the thing that uses the most Tainted Blood among the Marked is their regeneration."

To put it simply, just being able to fight while minimizing the amount of damage they take vastly increases the lifespan of a berserker. Given that they fight without knowing their limits, and that they die when they hit their limit, then it's natural that they don't know that they're using their powers to heal themselves. Which is why, even at this moment, Ran is now stronger than any other berserker has ever been before her.

"To be able to fight as long as possible against a fun opponent, they'll take care in their defenses. If they can do that as part of their daily training, then the resistance to defending and waiting will gradually go away. As Sansui noted, the reason the body tenses is because they're trying to do things they don't want to do."

The ideal would be if they could act without giving in to their desires, but that would take an enormous amount of time. In which case, the

shortcut is to make it fun to defend, ensuring that they'll want to practice that day to day.

"If he doesn't fight against an opponent who can break his precognition, he won't learn to respond quickly when that actually happens. In that sense, this is a good opponent for him."

Having learned how to use his Tainted Blood, Saiga has acquired an overwhelming amount of strength, even without using Eckesachs. However, he's also very aware that he needs to learn to control it. He has no doubt there will be hard times alongside all the fun times, but that makes it that much more important to enjoy what he's got right now.

That is, that's what he needs to do to be able to match the monstrous Sword Apostle, who can defeat a beast that takes a combination of Tainted Blood, Divination, Royal Presence, and Holy Power just to fight to a standstill.

"...I think they've been at it long enough. Zuger, go ahead and stop them."

"Alright! Both of you, please end your berserker state!" Zuger shouts, with tears in her eyes. And with that, the pair finally notice their arms are turning to stone, and sit down to try to settle down.

While Saiga can immediately drop his Mystic Arts and Spirit Summoning, it takes a certain amount of time to calm his burning silver hair. By contrast, having only recently learned the technique, Ran takes even longer for her hair to return to its natural color. Given that it's so difficult for them when they've spent this much of their Tainted Blood, it gives some idea of just how dangerous it is when they're overflowing with it.

"Phew... Thank you, Zuger."

"It's really scary to watch! The two of you when you're berserkers! I thought I was going to die! Just watching you!"

Having settled down a bit earlier, Saiga gently comforts Zuger. It's true that, right now, the berserkers don't yet have the ability to control themselves. They need the restraining power of her Hex Arts. At the very least, they're still in the process of developing a technique to restrain themselves.

"...Good, my hair's dyed now."

Ran confirms she's calmed down by checking her long hair. Her Tainted Blood still feels like it might overflow, but a comfortable fatigue is helping to keep her calm. If, as a berserker, she recovers quickly from her fatigue, it means that she's using her Tainted Blood for that purpose.

"Your hair isn't being dyed, it's returning to its natural color."

"Don't nitpick. It's been silver since I was born, so having it turn brown feels like it's being dyed."

A slightly calmer Ran then stands and exchanges a handshake with Saiga. She appreciates the fact that she was able to spend an enjoyable time with him, and can continue to do so from here on.

"Thank you."

“Don’t mention it. I had fun, too.”

Saiga responds to the handshake, but he’s clearly exhausted. Even if he has all of the types of energy flowing through him, he doesn’t have nearly as much Tainted Blood as Ran. As such, it’s for him to succumb to fatigue before Ran, even when facing her with a combination of abilities. He’d likely have collapsed if they’d continued fighting any longer.

“In my case, to increase my Tainted Blood, I have to become a berserker more often… Right now, I’m still putting too much burden on you.”

“Heh… No need for that. I didn’t think I’d be able to fight someone who uses so many martial arts. To wait a bit… Well, that’s part of the training, I’m sure.”

A life that had nothing to do with training, with fulfillment. That would definitely be a meaningless life, even a hollow one. She’s now enjoying days that she would have never experienced if Sansui had killed her. At the very least, Ran’s happy with her life right now.

“But putting that aside, I didn’t know there were practitioners of the Testudo Style, or people with the Celestial Blood, in the outside world, as well.”

In their conversation, Ran remembers an opponent from Tempera Village that she had fought, or had tried to fight. They were a very boring opponent, and she really didn’t care about them at the time.

“Yeah, Ran, that was definitely Testudo Style.”

“So, there are users of the Testudo Style, even outside the village.”

“I suppose it’s not unexpected.”

“The Testudo Style’s actually strong when combined with other styles, isn’t it?”

Completely new terms spring up in conversation for the first time in a while. The Batterabbe party have never heard of Celestial Blood or Testudo Style, but they have a decent guess of what it means.

“Testudo Style… A Rare Art?”

“That’s right, Saiga. I don’t know what it’s called out here, but in our village, there was a style that read the opponent’s movements before they performed them and responded appropriately. You have that ability as well, right?”

“You mean Time Power and Divination?”

It was one of the four Rare Arts that Saiga had learned before he met Sansui. That’s the precognition stemming from Time Power…that is, Divination. There had only been references to it in written records, and Saiga had only been able to learn the basics.

“I can use it… But I don’t have an instructor, so I can only do the basics.”

“Oh, so you brought back an extinct style? Impressive… Honestly, to me it was a style that was boredom incarnate, but it’s quite a threat when combined with other styles.”

The friendly discussion continues, and they quickly bridge the gap in terminology. The arts known in Tempera Village as martial arts styles are

known in the Arcana Kingdom as the Rare Arts. That's about the only difference separating Divination and Testudo Style. Though, that doesn't mean that the Diviners engaged in hand to hand fighting.

"Celestial Blood... Testudo Style? What is that? There were wielders of that in Tempera Village?"

No one would have batted an eye if anyone else had said it. But since it's the living encyclopedia Eckesachs saying it, everyone is caught by surprise.

"Even if the name has changed over the long years since then, I've never heard of anyone creating a martial art that uses Time Power-based precognition as part of their art. Is this a new style that's been developed over the last two thousand years?"

Tempera Village, the hidden village, whose secrets had all evidently been exposed to the world. It had seemed that there was nothing left to learn from the legendary secret village, but there's now a new mystery to look into. That meant that, for Saiga to truly master his Time Power, he would have to go to the village.

"Wait, no... If Tempera Village is still around... Then could it be that...?"

Part 15 — Accumulation

“You have had to shoulder much of the burden this time. I wanted to come here and apologize to you directly.”

That the current Lord Batterabbe has come calling to Lady Douve’s estate was perfectly understandable. After all, I’m Lady Douve’s bodyguard, and all the rest wasn’t part of my job description.

In spite of that, I’ve had to shoulder a whole range of issues, starting with training House Batterabbe’s new son-in-law. In particular, the whole project surrounding the use of berserkers is something that can’t happen without my help.

“My son and daughter have unwittingly placed a heavy burden on you. While they’ve probably realized that by now, I also wanted to apologize on their behalf.”

“There is no need to concern yourself on that front. I’m rather proud of the outcome, myself.”

Lady Douve appears satisfied that I was able to easily handle the berserker in front of the masses. I feel like she might eventually start running coliseum fights as a business. If that ever happens, I’m going to consider finding new employment.

“If anything, Tahlan’s simply become too attractive of a man… That’s what’s been hardest on me.”

As Lady Douve fondly mentions Tahlan, both Blois and I relax. It’s good for both of us that they’re getting along well.

“That fight was a good motivator for him. It only looked like a one-sided beatdown to me, but it appears it was entertaining for the gentlemen.”

Yeah, I’m sure that’s what it would have looked like to an amateur. Since that was partly what I intended, there’s nothing wrong with that. Having witnessed that, I doubt anyone would think berserkers are so dangerous that they need to be put down immediately.

“I went incognito to watch the display. There’s something extremely tempting about seeing things that were once only mentioned in legends.”

Lord Batterabbe then turns and looks at me with a gaze of awe. I can’t help but feel a bit embarrassed at the attention.

“With that in mind, it’s somewhat daunting to think of how impressive your master, Suiboku, must be.”

“As for that… Yes, I agree,” Lady Douve says, while Blois also nods wordlessly.

I don’t know what he was like in the past, but Master Suiboku is now a very calm person. He’s certainly much stronger than I am, but he’s also no longer the sort of person who might cause problems in the mortal world. I’d like to reassure them on that point, at least.

“Well, then, Sansui, what do you think of my son and the berserker girl?”

“They both seem to be enjoying their training. Although, I’m not directly instructing them at present. I’m simply reading the sensations of their sparring from afar.”

Honestly, they seem to be getting along. Putting aside the fact that they were almost guaranteed to work well together while in their berserker states, they also seem to be getting along well in terms of their thought processes, as well. They’re also both plenty impressive right now, and have only each other to spar against.

“At the very least, I don’t think there’s a risk of either of them losing control just now. I believe it’s rather comfortable for her to have someone to vent her overflowing aggression on.”

“I see… As a noble, I’m happy to hear that. As a father, perhaps not so much.”

I imagine that Happine’s probably grousing about that to him. Her fiance is off enjoying himself by constantly sparring with another young woman… No doubt there are some complicated emotions involved there.

“In terms of holding back their uncontrollable rage, they’re still feeling it out. Right now it’s better for them to remain off the battlefield rather than try it in actual combat. I believe you understand the reason for that better than I do.”

“Soldiers who are too caught up in their emotions to follow orders… Yes, that’s quite a problem.”

As I demonstrated, the appropriate judgment is much more important than optimized movements. That’s particularly true on a tactical level, far more so than on an individual level. This is something that House Sepaeda teaches and that I strongly agree with. Of course, House Batterabbe must also realize the importance of that.

“This is probably not a great way to phrase it, but all of ‘you’ seem to share a certain set of cultural characteristics. Of course, it’s not that I know the five of you very well, but at the very least, you don’t seem inclined to actively betray people. At least, that’s how it seems. Even for the man who took down the Empire.”

There’s a certain degree of trust in me behind those words. Though, really, there must be something faintly creepy about an entire group of individuals with absurd power levels also being relatively placid. I suppose it’s a form of acceptance.

“Your master described berserkers… Ah, right, they’re called the Marked in the Magyan regions, yes? But he described them as those who had too much of the Tainted Blood, correct? Because the effects of the Tainted Blood constantly affect them, they’re in a permanent state of heightened emotion. That’s natural, I suppose. If anything, society is likely to view you with suspicion more than it does them.”

I suppose it’s a fundamental compulsion for men to wish to do as they like because they’re strong. Even if there’s nothing waiting beyond that, it’s one of those childish desires, and no doubt women can be like that as well.

Lady Douve, for one, even if she's careful who she acts that way with. And while it's truly troublesome for people to live that way, it's also perhaps more understandable.

"I live as I please, and am allowed to act as I see fit. At the very least, thanks to House Sepaeda."

"I apologize for the problems we've caused you. However, I'm thankful that you act with a certain degree of reason. It'd be problematic if you were dedicated to a particular ideology and acted based upon it. What I'm trying to say is that, while you may be viewed as oddities by those around you, I want to assure you that you're acting properly."

Despite being the strongest individual in this nation, I'm still a retainer to a spoiled princess. No doubt that appears odd to people around me, especially given how young I look.

"Even Lord Ukyou is like that. While he showed little inclination to compromise on the matter of revenge, the cause that he fought for, that of a free and equal society, he intends to continue using more as a banner rather than impose it universally. In terms of policies, he's working to reduce taxes and restore order. Those are his highest priorities. As for the political system, he's basically restricted himself to changing who is in charge, not how they're in charge."

That was completely understandable. If the Empire was an oppressive regime, no doubt the literacy rate among the population was low. There's no way to solve that overnight. Liberal democracy requires an enormous amount of effort and expenditure to implement. I can't imagine that it's something they can afford to do while the people are struggling to eat. If asked to choose between a progressive political system and low taxes, the masses would probably choose the latter. It's a form of logic that even a dog would understand.

"You aces are strong, certainly, but more importantly, no one around you can keep up with your strength. In politics and in war, we'd like you to leave as much to us as possible. There's too much friction on both sides, otherwise. That is… If you feel you need to do something, we'd like you to discuss it with us first. For you in particular, we burden you with our problems regularly. With that in mind, we'd like you to feel free to ask certain favors of us, when necessary."

No doubt Shouzo made that point for them more than anyone. He has an extremely obvious and nation-threatening amount of power. If he were to acquire convictions and the motivation to act on them, the result would be catastrophic. That's probably true of all the other aces, too.

"Arcana is different from Magyan; the heads of the martial houses aren't overwhelmingly strong. That is why the only thing we can do is trust. I suppose you might think that it's a form of dependence."

"Then I'd like you to do something about the Regent. I feel I'm lending Sansui out to her far too often."

Lady Douve's request is extremely self-centered, but also right. Just as Lord Batterabbe was apologizing earlier, my job is to be Lady Douve's bodyguard. It's normal for me to be by Lady Douve's side, and all the rest is supposed to be ancillary.

"That's certainly true. I'll make sure to have a word with her. She's feeling rather desperate, but that's all about her own concerns. If you end up disliking her as a result, that defeats the whole purpose. No doubt she's aware of that, and therefore always teeters just on the edge."

Since it was an obvious point to bring up, Lord Batterabbe nods with the slightest of hesitation. Even if our displeasure is to be expected, I suppose he can also understand the Regent's perspective.

"However... I'd like you to have a bit of sympathy for her. The Regent is quite elderly, and she may very well die tomorrow. In a sense, she has nothing to lose, but at the same time, she doesn't want to take any regrets with her to the grave."

There's a bit of envy behind the look Lord Batterabbe directs my way. The grey in his hair has started to show more recently, whereas I haven't changed at all in the last five years.

"While you're here, while she herself is still here, she wants to create as many openings as possible. That's something I can understand."

This is a problem unique to cultures with a developed magical tradition. In countries where being able to use magic is a fact of life, for those from families wealthy enough to educate their children, an inability to use magic is a source of feelings of inferiority. Even putting aside questions of practicality, there's no doubt that they'd be treated harshly by those around them.

"Of course, there aren't many children who can't use magic at all, but they're hardly rare. The rate is about ten out of every thousand. Still, it's true that, other than those who can use the Mystic Arts, the remainder do struggle. I suspect that the person who feels that pain more acutely than anyone is the Regent, even though she's a first-class mage."

Children from all over the country who can't use magic gather here. If they have no talent for the Mystic Arts, the only thing they can do is give up. As a teacher, she must have been watching that for a long time.

"While she doesn't have any actual combat experience, until the Divine Punishment appeared she was the greatest, most powerful mage in the kingdom. That is why children of that sort gather from both within and outside the kingdom in search of a ray of hope. Until now she couldn't do anything for children who didn't have a gift for the Mystic Arts. At least, until you and my son appeared."

If a human being with a limited lifespan can't master it, it's not swordsmanship, it's an Immortal Art. Those are my master's thoughts, evidently. And while it's only part of it, my students have shown that the sword techniques developed by my master can be picked up by anyone. However, the Regent wasn't able to do that.

“Even if they have a talent for the Hex Arts, they probably would prefer not to know. Even if we know they have a talent for Spirit Summoning, politics makes it impossible to teach them. And even if they have a talent for the Immortal Arts, not everyone can leave the mortal world behind. It’s an open question as to whether those who learn they have a talent for becoming a berserker would ever want to become one.”

At the very least, my master and I would stop them from becoming an Immortal, because it’s a complete waste of a life. Well, I suppose if Lain had a talent for the Immortal Arts, I might have raised her as one, thinking that it was fate.

“However, the children who have the talent for Shadow Summoning now have an opportunity to learn it. At the very least they’re no longer considered ‘talentless.’ It’s something that she couldn’t have ever accomplished until now, no matter how hard she struggled. And now, it might be possible to learn even more Rare Arts, in the form of things taught as martial arts in that village. It’s understandable that she’s become even more ambitious. At the very least, neither I nor the previous Lord Sepaeda can come down too hard on her for it.”

The Sage, this kingdom’s greatest mage… It’s possible that she could even do something for my child, who can’t use magic. I suppose I can’t fault people for feeling that way, and in the end, they might make a request of their liege lord, but they will be told by the Regent there’s nothing she can do. No doubt there have been many examples of that up until now.

“It would be one thing to become a mystic, but I can’t imagine all the children would want to become a berserker or a martial artist.”

As a simple fact, in this kingdom, the only available Rare Arts are the Mystic Arts and the Hex Arts. In the past there was evidently something called Divination, but that’s been lost. Unless something is considered a necessary art, it’s normal for them to cease to be practiced, and at the very least, there aren’t many Arts that are as effective and in demand as the Mystic Arts.

“The Regent is well aware of that, but she still carries the guilt of not having been able to even provide them an opportunity. It’s true that it’s not as though they die because they can’t use magic, or that they can’t study because of it. However… Even if it’s just a sense of inferiority, when it all adds up, it can be very difficult to cope with. Not everyone can simply accept things as they are.”

Part 16 — Shame

“I’ve certainly had a long life. After a long life, it feels like it went by really quickly. No doubt that’s even the case for you, isn’t it, Master Sansui?”

“I’m not a man worthy of being referred to as master.”

I’m having a conversation with an old woman in a room lit by the evening sun. After being informed that Lain’s been doing extremely well in school, being ahead of where she would be otherwise, I’ve decided to listen to her regrets. Immortality is humanity’s eternal aspiration. At the very least, there’s not much difference in that between my homeland and this world. No doubt it’s even more so with a real Immortal in front of you.

“To believe one is superior because they’ve lived longer is foolish. I may have lived longer than you have, but I’ve never wanted to be of use to someone else.”

“Perhaps that way of thinking is a part of being a person having to live within a limited amount of time.”

“My time is not without limit, either. The difference in length isn’t, in the grand scheme of things, so important.”

I have a decent sense of what this elderly woman is thinking. Of course, she also understands that I know. She knows that she’s had a good, happy life and doesn’t really want eternal life at this point in her life. She just wants to talk.

“Death is the end for everyone. That’s the simple truth.”

“Yes... That’s so true. But the more you age, the less you can do in that moment.”

My master and I, in the end, declined to interact with other people. That’s natural for an Immortal, and I think that’s how it should be. Besides, I’m probably not an interesting person to be with, and I’d probably be in the way if I ever decided to settle down.

We’re a bit like trees growing in the mountains. We’re not things that are actually useful to people. Sure, people appreciate us, but people are things that appreciate things. I remember that much. I don’t fancy myself as more than human, but I do feel hesitant about interacting with ordinary humans.

“I’ve lived a long, long time, but I haven’t gotten better at anything. All I can do is kill people.”

Danua, the Silo of Plenty, traveling the world to bring an end to hunger in this world... She regarded both my master and I with a great deal of hostility. That’s only natural. Considering that all living things struggle to fill their stomachs, all we do is swing a sword from dawn to dusk. I mean, sure, we provide our own clothing and shelter, but it’s not something we had to do often, and since neither of us had any real material desires, resolving our needs was both quick and easy.

“In truth, in raising Lain, I should probably…have done more of the work myself.”

“My, my, that’s so like you.”

Instead, I just happened to meet and be hired by a scion of House Sepaeda, and have, essentially, had them raise her for me. I suppose you could look at it as my work paying for my daughter’s luxurious lifestyle, but I’ve also pushed all the hard work on other people.

That’s fatherhood. I suppose it might be accurate if someone else were to make that argument, and I can’t imagine that I could ever give her a satisfactory education on my own. Even though I think that maybe I should have worked harder in my own right, in this case, I probably couldn’t have made Lain as happy as she is now.

“I simply control my emotions. It’s not that I don’t have them. It’s not that I don’t have regrets, either, particularly regrets about whether I should have done things differently in one place or another.”

“I see… You feel those things, too, then.”

“But it’s not good to be driven by emotion. If you let emotion drive you too often, you lose your vital sense of judgment. It’s better not to fight than to think about *how* to fight.”

The right judgment is superior to the right action. That’s true of most things in the world. It’s the same as how it’s more important to be heading in the correct direction, rather than how fast or how slow you’re running.

“Sometimes it’s necessary to fight; this world isn’t that gentle. But fighting is something to be avoided as much as possible. The reason berserkers were hated and feared by society is probably that, in the end, they didn’t care who they fought.”

“There’s not much variety in how berserkers meet their end. Including the berserkers that your master, Suiboku, defeated, none of them died a peaceful death.”

Then again, listening to stories about what my master was like back in the day, he was pretty much a bit of a serial killer and went about randomly challenging people for the sake of it. So, I think it was a bit different when they were killed by my master.

“Your master understood how they worked and told Eckesachs. That’s a very meaningful thing for me. Though, really, we probably could have figured it out with your help, too.”

“I’m not so certain. She didn’t really draw my interest.”

“To leave something behind is important. The records of failures that I’ve been teaching ended up being useful for the Scarred Fool.”

Scholarship is the accumulation of failures, and theories come and go regularly. It’s common for misconceptions or wrong information to be written into academic texts, and that’s true of this world, too. I guess I understand this well because I’m from Japan, as well as having insights from being an Immortal.

“When you get older, you start thinking about what you should have or could have done in the past. But what’s harder than that is when you realize that, no matter what you did at the time, there was nothing you could have done about it.”

No doubt it must be frustrating to realize, upon reflection, that there was still nothing you could have done anyway. But that doesn’t make it okay to take dangerous risks, even if there is a hope of success. Thinking about what was lost as a result of those risks is hard for me to bear, as well.

The Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda told me not to worry about it. In truth, as it’s not something for me to take responsibility for, perhaps that’s right. But still, thinking about the possible victims that could result from that girl Ran running around loose, I can’t just stand by and do nothing.

“You don’t want to give up on it because it’s still in the experimental stage?”

“It’s my belief that I don’t even have to succeed for it to matter. But, at least in this academy, there’s a way to restrain her and ways for her to improve herself. If some person who came after me, someone I’ve never met, decided under these circumstances to take the safe route and give up before they even tried… No doubt they’d be regarded as a failure, both as a scholar and an educator. At the very least, I’d rage against such a teacher.”

But I suppose that’s what it means to live in the world of mortal humans. Perhaps there’s always a risk associated with trying things in human society, and if there are conditions that can minimize the risk, then it’s necessary to make the effort.

“You look at the present and the lives that are in front of you. That’s not a bad thing, and that’s how you should be. That’s why everyone trusts you, after all.”

“While you yourself are looking to the future?”

“I suppose that’s true, in one sense, but not in another. It’s true that I don’t think it’ll bear fruit immediately, and if it does bear fruit it’ll be after I die. But…I just don’t want anyone to curse my name. I don’t want those who share my ideals, the ones who come after me, to regard me as a coward. Even if they laugh at me, even if I fail, I want to make the attempt, after making sure I’ve done everything I can.”

If one doesn’t want to die, they shouldn’t fight. If they want to secure their survival, then they shouldn’t go to a dangerous place. But it’s wrong of me to say this. In that sense, the Regent and I are the same, and we know we don’t intend to change anything. We know our failings, but we still can’t change our beliefs.

She’s a strong person, a resilient person. A shallow man like me couldn’t possibly stop her.

“I spent five hundred years with my master and five years with Lady Douve. I have no regrets concerning those things, but I know there are many people who don’t feel that way.”

I only know the way of the sword, fighting, and what happened in those woods. I have none of the things that make up most human beings: firm beliefs, a consuming madness, ambition, or even avarice. This is why I can't stop her. That's something I knew from the start.

"…You're someone who should live a long time. Your life will certainly be more meaningful than mine."

I leave the Regent's room. I meet up with Ran and Saiga, who had been eavesdropping from outside. The four others from Tempera Village are there, as well. Of course, I'd sensed that the six of them were out here. It looks like they're also aware of that, but it doesn't change the fact that they were eavesdropping, and things are a little awkward for a moment.

"The Regent is free, if you need to speak to her."

"No, um… Actually, I need to talk to you, Sansui. Ran's four companions have decided to return to Tempera Village, so Ran and I will be accompanying them."

Hearing that, there wasn't anything else for me to say. There's no meaning in Ran returning to her homeland. The only thing that awaits her in her homeland is tragedy. But, at the same time, the other four are simply too lacking in training. If they want to become stronger, they should go back to their homeland and swallow their pride.

That and Saiga becomes stronger the more Rare Arts he learns. No doubt he's going there to learn presently unknown Arts.

"I see. I'm glad to hear that."

"So… There's something I wanted to say to you before that… Thank you for settling things without resorting to killing."

Who I didn't have to kill goes without saying. Although, while situations are so different that I can't quite say, no doubt he feels that it applies to him as well.

"We're very sorry for the trouble we caused you!"

The five of them bow deeply in apology. I can't quite put a name on what I feel at that moment. But this, too, is the result of a decision I made. Of course, not everything stems from my decisions.

"I… Very well, I accept your apologies. No doubt what awaits you will be difficult, but try to remember the humility you're feeling right now. Also… I don't know if something might happen, as Eckesachs is accompanying you… But if you learn something about my master, I would appreciate it if you could tell me what you've heard."

All told, if what Eckesachs says is true, then the one who most deserved to be killed was my master, back in his day. Even if he eventually became the master I know through his training, the people he was involved with at the time are still quite critical of him, and it's not as though his crimes have vanished, either. Though, I suppose the descendants of his victims won't really know what to say if his apprentice ends up offering them an apology after two thousand years.

“Please let them know that, depending on the circumstances, I, as his apprentice, will visit as well.”

I really, really would have preferred not to learn the shameful bits of my master’s past.

Part 17 — Immortal Arts

It’s rather obvious, but Tempera Village isn’t that far away from the Arcana Kingdom. In fact, it’s in the territory of the kingdom itself, and exists as a sort of ungoverned no man’s land within it. When considering that Sansui and Suiboku lived in an untouched forest of their own within the kingdom, Saiga and company couldn’t help but worry that the kingdom itself contained quite a number of dangerous individuals and groups.

Then again, Sansui had been living in this area since before the founding of the kingdom, and Tempera Village has been here for over three thousand years. If anything, the Arcana Kingdom came into the area afterwards and laid claim to the land they’d been in for years.

Regardless, the combined Batterabbe and Tempera party were steadily making their way toward the village on a House Batterabbe carriage.

“What sort of place is Tempera Village?”

“It’s a boring little village. It’s a collection of several houses that teach martial arts, and each house has a main branch and cadet branches. Myself included, all five of us who left the village belong to cadet houses.”

It may be a hidden village, but they’re still inhabitants of this world, so it’s not that different from how things work here, generally. Even if each family is protecting a bloodline that makes it easier for a Rare Arts user to emerge, not everyone from that family is going to have the talent for that Rare Art.

Just as Tahlan was born with Shadow Presence from the Magyan Royal Family, which has a higher incidence of being born with Royal Presence, there would be times that Tempera villages would be born with a different ability, or just the ordinary ability to use magic.

“Even if someone is born to the main branch, if they don’t have the talent for their martial art, they’ll send them to a cadet branch, and they might be treated poorly, even in the cadet branch. But if it becomes clear that they have the talent needed for another martial art, they can end up being adopted by that house.”

That the four who are about to return to their homeland don’t look very happy is ultimately because they’re not very fond of the village itself. That said, they’re still going to try to return to obtain a kind of closure, and because they still have many things that they want to learn.

At the very least, the other four are simply lacking in skill and are far from being able to stand on their own yet. Whether or not they’ll take them back is a different matter, but they still need to put in some proper training.

“There would occasionally be those who left the village to look for a bride or groom. After all, there are those with gifts for the martial arts outside of the village.”

It’s true that, based on the descriptions, it doesn’t sound like a very interesting place. There’s nothing about the place that seems to go against

the basic rules of the world. At least, Zuger and Sunae didn't find anything unusual about the description they were hearing.

"That aside... Saiga, I suppose it's late to comment on it, but you really do have the ability to learn multiple styles."

"Yeah, that's true."

"And you're also the apprentice of that man, Sansui. Does that mean he can also learn multiple martial arts, as well?"

Saiga is dumbstruck by Ran's question, to the point where he can't understand why she would think this. If that were the case, he really would be completely invincible.

"No, not at all. I'm the only one who has a talent for multiple Arts. Sansui's an Immortal. He uses the Immortal Arts and only possesses Ki. He hasn't taught me any Immortal Arts, and the only thing he's teaching us is swordsmanship."

"...Really?"

"Why did you think that? He's only been using the Immortal Arts."

"Well, uh... So, just what are the Immortal Arts?"

At what feels like a really obvious question, Saiga didn't have an answer. It's not just Ran. The others have the same expression.

"The Immortal Arts are techniques that Immortals use...and...uhh."

The only two who knew about Immortals are Saiga and Tahlan. Those two only have vague images of what Immortals might be, and since Suiboku and Sansui were just as they imagined, they didn't think to raise any further questions.

Flash Step, Feather Step, Ki Blade, Ki Wave... They seem natural techniques for an Immortal to use, but there's nothing that ties them together.

"Eckesachs."

Eckesachs is exactly the one to turn to in situations like these. After all, she accompanied an Immortal for a thousand years. No doubt she knows a lot about Immortals.

"Immortal Arts, mm...? Honestly, I don't have a good grasp on them. They synchronize with nature and utilize its power, but it's hard to put into words what sort of Art it actually is. Even if you were to ask the Immortals themselves, they could probably only tell you that it's an Art that works in accord with nature."

After all, they're undying Immortals. They have their own point of view and their own senses, and it must be very difficult to share those senses with ordinary people. It seems that it's impossible to give a specific description for the Immortal Arts. Still, she does have knowledge about what sort of techniques they can use.

"Techniques that concern vitality — Golden Balm, Coiled Peach, Divine Ginseng. Techniques that manipulate weather — Merciful Rain, Cleansing Flood, Great Thunder. Techniques that enhance one's own body —

Strengthen Self, Harden Self, Blink Step. There are also techniques that do things like shake the earth…”

Her descriptions just add to the confusion. Even if there are individual Arts that can manipulate those things, it’s difficult to imagine that a single art can encompass all of those things.

“Still, I doubt Sansui can use most of them. Given that even Suiboku said that he spent over a thousand years learning all of them, I doubt he could teach all of those in a mere five hundred years. Suiboku himself didn’t learn them from a single master, but instead went to an Immortal version of Tempera Village and sought instruction from multiple masters. Ordinary Immortals can supposedly only use one or two techniques.”

Even Eckesachs, who spent a thousand years — from twenty-five hundred years ago to fifteen hundred years ago — with Suiboku, evidently doesn’t know much about him from when he was still training. At a minimum, Suiboku spent a thousand years — spanning from thirty-five hundred years ago to twenty-five hundred years ago — being instructed by other Immortals. Since this is the history of one man, it’s natural that it doesn’t make sense to the others.

If there’s one thing that’s clear from all of this, it’s that the Suiboku that the Batterabbe party met is on a far higher plane than Sansui, as Sansui himself has stated multiple times. Those listening to the story have a hard time imagining the life of an individual that can be measured in millennia.

“If there’s one thing that I can state for certain, it’s that there are clear limits. The Art can’t be used like magic to create fire or water from nothing. To use fire techniques, one needs to be near a volcano or a fire, and to make it rain, there needs to be clouds in the sky.”

As it’s an Art that follows nature, although it’s able to make use of or manipulate things that exist there, it can’t create things that aren’t already there. Essentially, it’s an Art that is severely restricted by its surroundings.

“In that sense, the weather manipulation arts of the Immortals are far inferior to Vajra’s powers. Even with my help, it took Suiboku a week to gather up a cloud. Though, even then, Vajra was quite displeased.”

From the standpoint of farming, being able to create a cloud over the course of a week is a remarkable thing. From the standpoint of combat, however, waiting a week is something only an Immortal would stand around and do.

“In terms of vitality manipulation, whether we’re talking about the Golden Balm, Coiled Peach, or Divine Ginseng, it takes a ridiculous amount of time. It makes the amount of time required to make trees bear fruit look instantaneous by comparison. It depends on the scale, but evidently it can easily take a century or two. Once, when he needed to form Divine Ginseng to regrow an arm he lost, it took a full year to do so, even though he had me enhancing his Ki the whole time and used a giant elephant as the base. Oh, and there was that time when someone stole the completed fruit and he went into a rage.”

While Eckesachs is only retelling ancient history, Sunae's expression freezes. It seems she herself has once heard of a tale of that sort as ancient history or some such. Evidently, the world is smaller than was previously thought.

"At any rate, there are many different branches of Immortal Arts, but most aren't useful in combat. Even the Eight Sacred Treasures, myself included, have only heard of two Immortals trying to master battle and appearing in the mortal world: Suiboku and his apprentice, Sansui. Even if there are useful techniques among them, a reasonable Immortal wouldn't bother causing problems for people. If anything they'd actively avoid doing so. The most they'd deign to do is return lost humans to their homes."

The Sacred Treasure dedicated to battle thus basically tells them not to worry about it, because they'll never actually end up fighting an Immortal.

"Then… What sort of fighting style did this Suiboku have when he decimated Tempera Village?"

Ran herself beat everyone in her own village, but she's interested in hearing more about the man who's supposedly more powerful than Sansui. Maintaining her calm, Ran asks rather hesitantly.

"Like the Marked, he enhanced his strength with Strengthen Self and his speed with Blink Step. Then, in a manner similar to the Four Vessels Style, he increased the toughness of his body with Harden Self, combined with the ability to attack with a touch like the Bursting Venom Style through using his Ki Wave. In the same manner as enhancement magic, he increased his own attack ability using Ki Blade. Depending on the weather, he might manipulate downpours and call down lightning with Great Thunder to burn away his opponents. Of course, depending on the circumstances, he would also use Flash Step and Feather Step, as well. When he thought there would be strong opponents, he also created Golden Balm and Coiled Peaches. Golden Balm is a tonic that strengthens his resistance, and the Coiled Peaches increase his vitality. Of course, I enhanced all of that."

Just listening to the description, it's a completely different style from Sansui's way of fighting. If anything, back in the day, he fought like Saiga.

"Still, I think Sansui would be able to defeat him. Even you two should be able to put up a good fight against him. He was certainly always victorious at the time, but he didn't always win overwhelmingly. There were times when he only barely won. Which, I suppose, is why he wanted to find a way beyond that, leading to the Suiboku and Sansui of today."

She casually notes that Ran or Saiga could defeat the Suiboku of that era. At the very least, she didn't say that they stood no chance against him.

"As you are now, even if the Immortal Arts have a substantial number of abilities, they don't match a specialist in each area. And further, as the battles stack up, there is also fatigue that comes with them. In that sense, he was an ordinary opponent."

"So, you mean that Sansui and Suiboku are no longer bound by the ordinary."

Eckesachs, who considers even berserkers within the realm of the ordinary, finds Suiboku and Sansui now extraordinary, impossible to defeat. Hearing the facts as described by the ultimate sword created by God, Ran could only dwell on the revelations in silence.

“I will repeat this, but those two have now become ordinary Immortals. If you don’t pick a fight with them, they won’t come after you. It is a bit embarrassing to admit, but to challenge those two… Well, the results don’t even bear trying.”

While she is a sword that only accepts those who seek to be the strongest as her master, she does have some compassion. Given that the actual greatest warrior is the wielder who discarded her, she is able to talk the others around her down. Saying that it’s embarrassing to admit was the most resistance she could put up in the face of that reality.

Part 18 — Meeting

The wielders of the Testudo Style bear the Celestial Blood. They read the future and look into the past. Having incorporated that into their fighting, they've also expanded their insights into reading the future beyond mere combat. The old man with long, unkempt hair, bleached of color from age, is the head of the Testudo Style, and he has foreseen something he'd rather not have.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings…but Ran will be returning."

The head of that house gathers the heads of the other houses and makes his report, more than a little sourly. It's perhaps only natural that the assembled heads of the houses all shared his grim expression upon hearing the news.

Those assembled, the head of each style and each house, had pride in one thing and one thing only — their martial art. The arts that had been passed down generation to generation since time immemorial were their symbols of strength and reasons for being. But they had been thoroughly defeated by a young woman who was a product of chance, a girl who fought with wild movements that had nothing to do with the refinement of martial arts.

Of course, they're all merely human and not lords of any sort. In their daily lives, they do odd jobs to keep themselves fed, and it's not as though they're like Sansui or Suiboku, practicing from dawn till dusk each and every day. The styles may have over a thousand years of history, but they don't have any Immortals that have been around for a millennium. But, even then, they'd all believed in the strength provided by martial arts, and it gave meaning to their lives.

That was all — *they* were all — destroyed by a genius, a talented individual. Frankly, almost all of the houses had been relieved when she left. None of them even considered sending anyone to follow her and kill her. The village had reached a consensus that they just wanted to pretend she'd never existed at all and thus forget about her.

"My precognition isn't absolute, but…she is most certainly returning this way."

The precognition that comes from Celestial Blood manifests in two forms: visions that change and visions that don't. For example, a premonition that it will rain tomorrow is one that will not change. Unless someone uses the Immortal Arts or Vajra, it's not something that changes once foretold. Or, rather, it's something that can't be changed by merely foreseeing it.

On the other hand, in examples such as the battle between Sansui and Saiga, the actions of human beings will change dramatically from the simple act of observation. This is because, if the diviner changes their actions

based on their vision, other people will change their actions in response to the diviner's changes.

In those circumstances, the future changes from the very act of the diviner acting on their own information. It's the very basic truth underlying Testudo Style. And because it's a martial art that doesn't include direct attacks or defensive maneuvers, it's always been seen as a rather weak style.

However, it's thought to be unerring in situations such as this. As such, everyone present sank into a gloom at knowing that the monster was coming back.

"What do we do?" someone asks. The others remain silent.

The simple truth was that, as Ran noted, until her losses to Sansui and Sunae, no one in the village could stand up to her, not even by attacking her all at once. It was true that she had been a big fish in a small pond, but in the end, within Tempera Village, she was absolutely invincible, and a pest that threatened both men and livestock alike.

That pest had taken several girls from the cadet branches and left. And now she's coming back.

"And not just the five of them, but there are outsiders accompanying them. Further... Among them is the wielder of Eckesachs."

A murmur goes through the room as the house elders talk. It seems that the elders themselves were rather skeptical, but according to the tales, there was a legendary individual who had decimated the village a thousand years ago, and that individual had been wielding Eckesachs.

They had all been skeptical at the sheer ridiculousness of the tale, but Ran's birth showed them that it was perfectly plausible. That meant that there was enough power approaching Tempera Village to destroy the village twice over.

"Well then, everyone, what shall we do about this?"

"What to do? What even is there to do?!"

The village is weak tea, Ran had said. Her observation hadn't been wrong.

Suiboku had said that the concept of being the strongest was a goal, and that it was plenty to have it as something to work towards. The people of this village can use martial arts. That's their reason for existence. And as a simple fact, they're extremely strong.

But they're not desperate for more. None of them are like Ran, seeking more challenges in the outside world. They were content to live their lives out in this cloistered village, practicing against well-known friendly rivals, passing their art from generation to generation, respecting their fathers as their masters. They had no intention of letting the girl who'd destroyed all that back in.

But in that case, the question remains of what they could do about it. Trying to fight her off, trying to reject her...the people of this village know the futility of that better than anyone.

“If there is one hope left to us, it’s that she appears to have learned how to restrain her rage during her time in the outside world. If we don’t treat her with hostility, we should be able to avoid having her go on a rampage.”

There are opponents who even she can’t defeat outside of the village... Someone exists who’s superior to the collective power of this entire village, and that someone is able to restrain her. That fact leaves the elders in a dilemma. While they’re glad that she can be restrained, celebrating that fact feels like an admission of failure.

“I believe...that we should welcome them. At the very least, we shouldn’t fight them.”

Just because they regret their past actions, there’s no need to welcome them with open arms. But if this opponent can be reasoned with, meeting with them seems to be the best choice. Of course, it’s not as though there’s anyone among the gathered elders who still wants to fight her.

“That’s fine, sure... But what’s the point of the meeting? Why are they even coming here?”

“I don’t know. That’s not the sort of thing I can foresee yet.”

The things that can change based on precognition are extremely difficult to read. At the very least, they can’t look into what will happen over three days before the actual event takes place. But it’s also proof that how they respond will change how the visitors respond.

“At the very least, it won’t end up the same way as what happened when Eckesachs’s last master appeared here.”

The worst scenario would be if an opponent approached that wouldn’t change their attitude, regardless of how they dealt with them, though they would also have a very high level of certainty in the accuracy of the prediction. That worst-case scenario isn’t happening. By telling the others this, the elder of the Testudo Style is trying to calm them.

“You say that, but what’s there to do?”

“Yeah... How do we put it?”

Even if, by some miracle, they were here to apologize, they don’t even want to see their faces. They’d like to forget about Ran and the other four, pretending they never existed. As such, they’re really just afraid, but Ran is just that much of a symbol of dread to them.

“Then we have no choice... I will take this matter into my own hands. But, in exchange, I ask that you give me full discretion on how to handle the four who accompanied Ran.”

The Testudo Style elder had known, even without divining, that this would be the outcome. That the others all remained silent, showing reluctant agreement to his proposal, shows that his judgment was sound.

Part 19 — See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Say No Evil

It goes without saying, but the party didn't expect that Tempera Village would welcome them with open arms. However, they were still driven by a need to settle things, and by a process that they needed to see through to the end. It's at least better to show one's face and be rejected rather than unilaterally throw aside one's homeland.

Even in the worst case, they have a responsibility to state that they don't plan to return to this village and that they won't cause it any further trouble. Of course, it would be best if they'd accept back everyone other than Ran.

"To think there's this sort of hidden vale inside the Arcana Kingdom…"

Happine is drenched with sweat as she hikes up the mountain pass. There's a rough path of sorts, but it just barely functions as a road.

"You know, the reason Tempera Village isn't governed by the Arcana Kingdom probably has to do with this…"

"You know, the reason Tempera Village isn't governed by the Arcana Kingdom probably has to do with these awful roads… Even if there are people living here, it'd be too much hassle to bother collecting taxes!" Happine says, huffing out her complaints. She's probably right, though.

Even if the village has existed since before the kingdom was founded, the Arcana Kingdom is the one with the power on its side. It would have been normal for it to have absorbed the village. But even putting aside the fact that the roads leading to Tempera Village were poorly maintained, the route was a harsh one. Frankly, it's far too steep a grade. Walking the path to the village is essentially a form of mountain climbing.

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't keep walking…"

"Don't worry about it."

Zuger, Ran's safety switch, could no longer walk the mountain path, which is why Saiga is currently carrying her on his back as they trek onward. With the original boost to his physical abilities that he received upon coming to this world, backed with a bit of Spirit Summoning, Saiga has no trouble carrying Zuger's light weight. Happine seethes as she watches them.

"We're almost there, so just bear with it a little longer. The road should start flattening out soon."

The five locals traverse the road easily. Of course, their hearts are a bit oppressed, but they still feel the need to move forward. In Ran's case, she'll have to apologize to the elders and admit that their preaching self-control was correct, while the other four need to apologize for mocking their homeland in following Ran and ignoring their own lack of training.

"There, it's an easy path from here."

With the mountain pass behind them, the hidden vale containing Tempera Village, populated by wielders of various martial arts styles, comes into view. A number of farm plots and wooden houses dot the landscape in a land tucked between tall mountain ranges. In one sense, it's just a common rural vista. It's hard to believe that there are so many Rare Arts users hiding here.

"There are the ten houses of the major styles. There's also a building that serves as a sort of meeting house. Want to start there?"

They had just recently left the village, and they honestly hadn't thought they'd ever be back. Seeing it again brings up a complicated mix of emotions. The five aren't sure how to proceed.

"No, no, that would be problematic."

As the party looks down at the village, an elderly man, who appears to have been waiting for them, pops up. It's a familiar face for the five, while for the Batterabbe party, they can guess on who it is based on the fact that he was waiting for them.

"I am a bearer of the Celestial Blood, and a teacher of the Testudo Style… No doubt you are already aware of who I am, so I would like it if you could simply stop by my home. I don't know what precisely has happened, but it seems that Ran has calmed down… But, even so, those of the village are still quaking at the thought of seeing her again."

At the very least, he seems to have seen that the party would first stop at this location. Evidently aware that the party has no intention of opposing his invitation, the old man turns his back and begins walking. Given that they were half-expecting to be greeted by thrown stones, they should probably appreciate the peaceful welcome. It's not as though they're here to fight or demand the village come under the kingdom's control. If they're able to talk to someone with a fair amount of status within the village, then that's a perfectly acceptable development.

The party follows without complaint. It's obvious in hindsight, but the roads of Tempera Village itself are hardly well paved, either. At the same time, they're still substantially better than the path they'd been walking earlier, and it was, at most, a stroll along a country road. They barely see any houses worthy of the name, nor any inhabitants of the village, before they come to a large, single-story home.

"I can only offer you some medicinal tea, but please take a moment to relax."

It's a house with a large room that looks like a cross between a training dojo and a temple. It's clear this is one of the main houses, and that it was meant to be a gathering place, which makes the lack of people in it somewhat disturbing. Which means, after foreseeing that they'd come here, no one wanted to meet with the ten. It's only natural, perhaps, but they're clearly viewed with suspicion, even hatred.

Still, all of them seem to regard this as perfectly natural, and all of them quietly…sit down and take some rest.

“Zuger, Happine. Let me heal your feet first.”

“Thank you.”

“Oof… That was really exhausting.”

Those not used to walking mountain paths are exhausted. Or, rather, their feet were already swelling up. In fact, they have also turned red from the exertion. Some might have popped some blisters.

Feeling a bit of guilt over dragging them into this, Saiga uses his basic mystic abilities to heal their feet.

“I wouldn’t…call it an embarrassment, exactly. They did well to come this far.”

There’s no reason for Happine to have accompanied them to this village. However, if Saiga is going somewhere to learn something, then she needs to go with him. That was the decision she’d made. Sunae offers a few words of encouragement, showing her approval of Happine’s actions.

“So there really are martial artists who make use of their divination abilities… Why…?”

Sunae is flabbergasted. Sure, the Bursting Venom Style and the Four Vessels Style, like her Spirit Summoning, are styles that require fighting unarmed. It’s natural for those bearing that blood to become martial artists. But she didn’t understand why diviners would feel the need to fight unarmed.

“The reason is rather simple… Our founder stated that he was so mortified when he got into a fight and got hit, despite knowing the punch was coming, that he decided to start a martial art incorporating his precognition.”

The elder, carrying a tray with the medicinal teas, offers an explanation with a self-deprecating smile. It was something Saiga had first-hand experience with. Even if you divine your opponent’s movements and respond to them, if against a skilled opponent, they can still respond to the forewarned response.

It must have been like the first time he fought Sansui, when no matter how much he read into the future, he came to the conclusion that he simply couldn’t win. He couldn’t help but empathize with the founder’s desire to develop a way to ‘win’ in those circumstances.

“As you’ve heard, our style incorporates precognition. That is why I understood you would be visiting and am now welcoming you.”

It’s an odd story, but it also means things can proceed smoothly, as both sides are aware of precognition.

Still, the Batterabbe Party didn’t feel that there was anything extraordinary about the old man in front of them. Having met Sansui and Suiboku, this man who can read the future only appears to be a tired old geezer. Or, rather, they realize that he’s exactly as he appears.

“And, in reality, our style isn’t particularly weak. We’re never caught off guard, nor do the last-gasp blows from inferior opponents ever hit us. However, in the end, against opponents that we simply can’t beat… It

means that we know that we can't defeat them, no matter what steps we take."

That's perhaps the difference between Saiga, who can read the future, and the old man, who can *only* read the future. Saiga has numerous ways to respond in any given situation, but for the old man, those possibilities don't exist.

Thinking about that, Saiga almost feels a sense of shame. The man in front of him, despite putting in all sorts of effort, from before he was even born, can only see futures where he loses to Saiga or Ran.

"...Then there are a few things I'd like to ask. Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead."

Saiga doesn't know what he's going to ask. It's possible he'll ask things related to Suiboku, or even why they decided to come to this village in the first place. Or perhaps it'll touch on the fact that he can use every Art.

Regardless, Saiga waits.

"That's enough."

And is let down.

The entire party, Eckesachs included, were tense, waiting to see what would be asked, only to have it end with no questions at all. This despite the fact that he specifically noted he was going to ask some questions.

"Ah, I see. I understand your reasoning... Then, at least for those four, we'll take care of them within our house. We'll also train them."

He suddenly jumps ahead in the conversation. The discussion proceeds as though he's already asked all the questions that he needs to.

"Now, Master Saiga. You wish to learn martial arts. If you wish to learn Testudo Style in particular... I will provide you with the Book of Secrets for our style, and for the styles for the four of their styles, for a total of five volumes. I'm afraid that I can't provide you with the books from the remaining families."

It's not as though he's taken the initiative in the conversation, nor is he trying to take advantage. The tired old man simply seems intent on bringing the conversation to a quick end.

"Please rest assured that the other Houses have already accepted this proposal."

Which means, it's clear what this old man has done. Having said that he was going to ask Saiga questions, he went ahead and read all of the potential questions and answers to find out all of the things that the Batterabbe party wanted.

"...So this is the potential of a Time Power family, of a specialist in Divination."

"It's not much of an ability. It's not as though we can read our opponent's minds, and if you can't see through an opponent's lies, it's completely useless. Besides, I doubt it's something that's pleasant to be on the receiving end of."

The old man states that, knowing that doesn't provide any special insights into the world itself. In fact, if Saiga had no intention of answering his questions, he wouldn't have learned anything.

"Frankly, if you do this to people close to you, they'll stare at you as though you're odd, then won't answer anything after the first time."

It's an understandable exchange if you randomly met an old man who can read the future on your travels. However, if there's an old man living in your neighborhood who regularly does that, no matter what, he's going to end up hated.

"Well, please consider it a mere conversational quirk... Just knowing the future doesn't mean one can manipulate it in a way that benefits them."

Ran and the others from Tempera Village hadn't suspected that the Testudo Style had this sort of power. A martial art that's really boring and not that strong... That was about the most they thought about it, but that was just one part of it.

"Even if we've inherited the facts about our founder and our blood from our ancestors, we have no need to be tied down by their teachings. There's no point if you die by acting in accordance with those teachings."

"Just as you survived two thousand years ago?"

"Exactly."

At Eckesachs's question, the tired old man answers quietly.

"Two thousand years ago, Tempera Village had been waging regional wars and gathering laurels. Indeed, their reputation was such that hiring Temperan soldiers was said to guarantee victory. By reading the past, I was able to confirm this. The village at the time was very prosperous."

The old man describes the glories of the past, but he doesn't seem to think that it's a past worth celebrating. If anything, he seems to believe that the prosperity of the past was a mistake, and that the current way of things is the right way.

"However, that is what ended up drawing you. Those that were truly the most powerful in the world... Eckesachs and her wielder, Suiboku."

At the time, Suiboku was in the midst of a quest to test his mettle. To frame it in a positive light, it was when he was most lively; to frame it negatively, he was going around murdering everyone with a reputation for strength.

With his strong relationship with Eckesachs, it was perhaps natural that he made his way to this village.

"Having declared without reservation that they were peerless in the world, the villagers at the time fought against him, and had all of their skilled practitioners cut down. In a rage, they all combined their efforts to go after him... Everyone but our ancestors, that is."

It was a form of self-imposed extinction. Just like Eckesachs had noted with surprise, the greatest practitioners of the era had all fought Suiboku and were cut down. Now, it's probably not right to make it sound like they

rather attacked Suiboku entirely one-sidedly, but regardless, the nine houses of the time were essentially destroyed.

“Our ancestors had foreseen everything. That challenging him would mean all of them would die, but that there was no way to talk them down from their challenge… That is why we ran and hid.”

It’s not as though Suiboku, even then, was a fan of mass murder. He wouldn’t hold back against anyone who chose to fight him, but he wouldn’t pursue those who didn’t want to fight him. Once the storm called Suiboku had left, the Celestial-Blooded practitioners of the Testudo Style worked to rebuild their village.

“Of course, we didn’t know the secret techniques of each House, and even if we did know of them, it would have been meaningless. So techniques taught by word of mouth were lost, and many techniques were lost generally. What allowed us to restore them was our ability to look into the past. We took the babies and children who hadn’t participated in the battle and managed to raise them, slowly bringing back the lost styles.”

At a minimum, the ones who taught all of the Houses were the practitioners of the Testudo Style. That is why the Books of Secrets for each House existed, and why they still possessed them.

“We have no intention of making a fuss over what happened two thousand years ago… But our ancestors learned, just as we learned with Ran, that no matter how powerful you might consider yourself to be, there was no way to beat monsters who are far beyond the ordinary.”

Hearing that, Ran and the other four could only nod in agreement. They certainly didn’t feel like they could defeat Suiboku’s apprentice. If he had received orders to kill them, there would have been nothing they could have done.

They also haven’t forgotten that they themselves had, in the past, mocked that attitude as the attitude of a loser, and that they themselves had looked upon that attitude with contempt.

“The reason this village has continued since is because we put a cut-off on our definition of what we considered to be the strongest warrior. If we had continued to serve as mercenaries, it’s likely someone else would have destroyed us by now…”

The reason the village still exists is not because it’s strong, but because it isolated itself. Because they’d decided survival is more important than winning. Even if the martial arts had become mired in forms rather than being useful killing techniques, even if martial arts had turned from weapons to culture and sports, the village had managed to secure two thousand years of peace.

That is, in itself, worthy of praise.

“Now, it’s understandable that you might view that as boring… But I beg you not to push that view upon us.”

Our village is great, our martial arts are strong, we’ve been undefeated for a thousand years. Did anyone suffer as a result of those boasts? What’s

wrong with pulling back into your village, refining the fighting styles created by your ancestors, and enjoying competition between villagers?

“Those of this village abandoned the pursuit of being the strongest in the world a long time ago.”

It was an enormous burden… To have an actual beast that could very well have been the strongest in the world upend the fun little world they’d constructed for themselves. Despite the fact that they were busy training in their free time, between various jobs, to have her seriously contend that they needed to train harder to kill her… They couldn’t very well keep up with that, and they’d prefer that she just go away.

“Ran… There is no place for you in this village. We have no intention of forgiving you or killing you. Everyone simply wishes to forget you were ever here.”

They’d been enjoying themselves, they had put in a fair amount of effort and training, and they had their share of confidence. But they’d had all of that trampled upon by a child who’d put in no effort herself. They want nothing more than to pretend that it had never happened.

“…I see.”

Ran answers shortly, sadness crossing her features. She had done plenty to deserve that sort of response, but that was hard for those who’d traveled with her to bear. In the past, Saiga might very well have punched the old man for saying it.

But the truth is that Ran isn’t being rejected by the village simply because she’s strong. It’s because she’s caused so many problems for the village, because she’d gone on a rampage, that they’re treating her so coolly. It was, as Sansui had stated, that she’d gone and done things from which there was no coming back.

“And for the other four, we also don’t really want you to stay very long. We will instruct you and teach you the basics. We’ll point out your shortcomings. But once that’s done, we expect you to leave.”

The old man himself seems aware that what he’s saying is harsh, that his instructions are cold. But the reason for that harshness lies with all five of them. Even if the Tainted Blood had been the cause, and that it appears to have been settled for now, they aren’t so forgiving as to accept that reason.

“…I appreciate how you are handling the four of them. Thank you. Please help them,” says Ran, bowing her head to the Testudo Style elder.

With her calm thoughts, she knows she needs to head out of the village as soon as possible. She knows there’s nothing to be gained for anyone the longer she stays.

“…Thank you for the Books of Secrets. I’ll…make sure to treasure them.”

Saiga, too, stands. The others, having finished their brief rest, also prepare to leave.

As Ran can't stay here, they themselves can't stay, either. After all, the villagers don't want to know about the world beyond the mountains.

"Thank you… I'm sorry."

The sun is already high up in the sky. If they're to leave the village now, they'd have to walk down dark mountain roads to get down. But even then, they decide to leave after saying their goodbyes to the four staying behind.

The old man watches them, those that will participate in the battle to protect the world, leave with heartfelt relief, having found their presence thoroughly tiresome.

"…None of it matters to us. What the true strongest warriors say in the world outside of our village. They can do as they please."

Watching them leave, the old man thinks back to his divined questions and answers. Recently, he'd seen a particular vision of the future. When asking about the contents of that vision to Eckesachs, she'd been in quite a panic.

Whether described as Divination or Testudo Style, Time Power or Celestial Blood, the underlying mechanics are the same. While it happens unintentionally, the most effective form of divination comes while sleeping.

And the old man, despite his limited time left in this world, has seen what will happen in the not too distant future in his dreams. Having read how Eckesachs would react to the contents of that dream, he chose not to tell her. He's seen nothing, he's heard nothing, and he'll say nothing. He intends to maintain his chosen ignorance. The seer knows that's the wisest and least exhausting way of living in this world.

"Truly?! The dragons have found this world?!"

"The lizards who drove humanity to this world ten thousand years ago are here? Now?!"

"The battle for survival between humanity and the dragons is about to resume."

"Fine, this time we'll win! We, the Eight Sacred Treasures, were created for that reason, after all!"

The legendary berserkers, the ultimate legendary sword, dragons, none of that mattered. He's never had the will, the strength, or the desire to deal with anything that ridiculous.

"So tiresome."

The old man, who never wanted to know anything, is already trying to forget what he saw.

Part 20 — Role

As the Batterabbe party made its way to the Tempera Village, Lord Sepaeda and Douve were having a family meeting. The matter was important enough that Lord Sepaeda had sent an escort from the capital, so that Douve alone would come to see him, leaving Sansui and Blois at the academy. Douve herself understood that this was not simply a family meeting, but rather an important discussion as a member of House Sepaeda.

“Once again...”

While Douve may tease her older brother, who serves as the head of House Sepaeda, she places a great deal of trust in him. Given his serious expression, Douve, while smiling, has no intention of teasing him now.

“Sansui has done well by us.”

“Thinking back on it, we’ve always asked the impossible of Sansui.”

“Yes, his loyalty has been admirable.”

“He has wielded the blade he spent five hundred years honing without hesitation for the sake of this kingdom.”

“I agree.”

“Now, what do you think we can do for him?”

Ah, it is, in fact, an extremely important topic. Douve decides then to accept whatever it is her brother proposes.

“My Lord, I do not know specifically what we can do, but whatever reward we offer, we should spare no expense for him.”

She isn’t sure what he plans to offer Sansui as a reward. However, Douve feels that if there’s anything they can do, even one thing, then they should do it. While she wouldn’t say it in his presence, she has no reservations against richly rewarding him.

“However, My Lord, you are aware of Sansui’s personality. I highly doubt he desires land or laurels.”

There’s no point in giving Sansui a reward he wouldn’t appreciate. As an employer, a humble employee is a blessing, but it makes situations like these rather difficult.

“I have considered it, and I believe the best reward would be some time off.”

“…I agree. Sansui does always accompany me.”

“Not just for Sansui, but for Blois, as well.”

It’s true that Douve is always accompanied by Sansui and Blois, no matter where she goes. Once she hit a certain age, she even had Lain accompany her as well. Of course, for things like society functions, she’d leave Sansui and Lain behind, but Blois had always been at her side.

“Then, Your Lordship…”

“Yes.”

The relationship between Sansui and House Sepaeda, which hadn’t changed in the past five years, was about to change dramatically.

“Until now, the two of them have been assigned to protect you, but we’ll be relieving them of that assignment. We will provide Sansui with another role and an appropriate rank, and have him marry Blois.”

“And Blois will retire, I assume?”

“I believe that would be the best reward we could give them. Do you have any objections?”

“Not at all, Your Lordship.”

Douve acquiesces in a manner unimaginable based on her usual demeanor.

“I’m grateful to Sansui and Blois for all they’ve done for me each and every day. If it makes them happy, then that would be best.”

A faint moue of loneliness crosses her features, but she quickly cuts off that sentiment.

“After all, as one with an overly doting father and brother, I should at least know when to let go.”

“Uh… Hrmph.”

Well aware of his own faults, Lord Sepaeda refrains from comment.

“But, if I may ask, Your Lordship?”

“What?”

“Why now?”

There had been discussions of Sansui and Blois getting married before. It was soon after that that Sansui’s actual age was revealed, but because Blois was still attached to Sansui, the subject never went away. But, still, it was rather sudden. It didn’t seem to be that urgent, so the timing caught Douve by surprise.

“One reason is that we now know Sansui is capable of doing things other than serving as a bodyguard.”

“That…is true.”

“If he couldn’t do anything else, we couldn’t very well relieve him of that task. But now, we can confidently assign him as a sword instructor.”

A swordsman’s skill isn’t necessarily related to their abilities as an instructor. At the same time, instruction for nobility and for soldiers are different matters, as well. By having him instruct various people, ranging from Saiga and Tahlan to an assortment of ruffians, they’d learned Sansui was capable of both.

In which case, they can provide him a role as an instructor. Sansui himself has received permission from his master, Suiboku, and has witnessed those under his tutelage gain skill, so he probably doesn’t have any complaints on that front, either.

“The other concerns the matter of Ran.”

“What would that have to do with anything?”

“On a basic level, the definition of ‘people who ought to be killed’ is the same for our House and for Sansui. That is why there have been no problems until now.”

While Sansui is over five hundred years old, while he lived in the woods, he didn’t gain any combat experience, and therefore had never killed anything, human or otherwise. Despite that, Sansui shares the same ethics on killing as House Sepaeda.

Anyone who draws their sword and points it at another is fair game. As for opponents who ignore warnings, well, they’ve more than given up their right to live. And the opponents that Sansui has killed while serving as Douve’s bodyguard are basically people who have attacked him in the course of trying to harm her. Even putting aside the matter of Douve being a daughter of House Sepaeda, he has no qualms about killing any number of people of that sort.

But if House Sepaeda had ordered Sansui to kill opponents who Sansui didn't want to kill, and if that had started to become the norm… Given his lack of attachment to society, he may very well have taken Lain and fled.

To give a few basic examples, they could have been people who committed crimes not deserving of death, ordinary citizens who simply didn't have much social status, or those who had committed religious blasphemy.

Douve doesn't have the best personality, but she has kept from crossing that specific line. She can enjoy herself without crossing it, so there's no point in doing so.

"But Ran is different. We believe that she should be left alive, but Sansui believes that she should die."

But, on the other hand, what if House Sepaeda orders Sansui to spare an individual that Sansui believes should die? And, in particular, if it's given as an order specifically given to Sansui to capture them alive, rather than as a matter not involving him at all? That is the situation they find themselves in now.

"It's true that berserkers are dangerous. From the perspective of protecting the people of the Arcana Kingdom, there's more than enough reason to kill her. But even considering that, we prioritized creating a new Rare Art by sparing her and absorbing the other four martial artists."

"You believe Sansui is dissatisfied by this?"

"We made him do something he didn't want to do. We should be more considerate as a result."

They got greedy and decided to spare a dangerous individual. It's not an unfair description of the situation. And Sansui, who was concerned about the dangerous individual, was the one tasked with keeping her alive. Of course he might resent it.

"If all we wanted to do was kill Ran, we'd have just sent Shun to take care of her. That'd be the most certain method, at least."

"But that would involve owing a debt to House Disaea."

"If something is really necessary, there's no reason to concern ourselves with things like debts and favors. But if we didn't need it to be certain, we could have asked Sunae or Saiga to deal with it. They might not want to, but no doubt they'd agree once the reasons were explained to them."

Berserkers are in a constant state of heightened emotion, and have an extremely hard time running away. They can't ignore even the tamest taunts and attacks. Even if she understands, rationally, that she can't win, Ran would react the same way against any opponent.

"But, this time, we ordered Sansui to make her accept defeat, because Sansui was the only one who could do it."

Not kill. Not defeat. Make them accept defeat, make them understand that they can't win. How to do that with a berserker, even the ones giving the orders hadn't known.

It was pointless to knock them out quickly, as Sansui did in his first bout. The method of exhausting her Tainted Blood, like Sunae had done, hadn't worked, either. They had never imagined that he would beat her until she broke down in tears.

"But that means we made Sansui take an unnecessary risk. Although, Sansui himself felt guilty about letting her go the first time, so he couldn't object too strenuously."

"Risk? Sansui?"

"Sansui isn't particularly tough. You're aware of that."

Berserkers were, ordinarily, monsters that would be fairly described as the strongest creatures in this world. Against such an opponent, Sansui explained how he was fighting and continued to demonstrate how he was fighting, barely avoiding disaster each time.

The fact that he accomplished it without incident means that it's easy to forget just how dangerous a line he had been treading. He had, by most standards, been risking his life.

"Appreciation only means something if it's expressed while we live. If having Blois retire and remove herself from the frontline is a thing that brings joy to Sansui, then the earlier, the better."

"That is true of Blois and Lain as well, yes?"

"Of course," Lord Sepaeda declares, in a manner worthy of Sansui's master. "Sepaeda is a martial Great House. We must provide appropriate rewards for good work."

Side Story — Contradictions

The Disastrous Armor of Destruction, Pandora. Because of its very particular character and features, it's considered the most vile of the Eight Sacred Treasures. What is it that makes it so problematic? The armor can only be used by an individual who wants to die. That is, an individual with a death wish.

Still, the armor itself and effects on its wearer aren't inherently problematic, but what it does to those around it is particularly nasty. The function of the Disastrous Armor of Destruction is to drag in everyone, including its wearer, and indiscriminately kill everyone around it.

Because the possibility of the wearer dying exists, it's not something that can be casually used. However, because the armor can only be worn by someone who wants nothing more than to die, it ends up being used more frequently than you might think.

Whatever weapon or soldier it might be, it's not much use if it won't attack the enemy the owner wants defeated. No matter how powerful, it's not something you can keep on hand if it'll go on a rampage on its own. For someone in power to make use of Pandora, they have to find a person who has the extremely odd combination of a death wish and absolute loyalty.

That alone makes it a problematic artifact, but there's another difficult condition that must be fulfilled: the wearer needs to be physically suited to being a wearer of Pandora. Someone with the physical characteristic of being completely unaffected by Pandora's powers. In other words, a human being who's in no danger when wearing Pandora. Someone with a death wish but who can't end up one-sidedly massacring their opponents.

That is the man known as Shun Ukiyo. The man that God provided to House Disaea, the perfect candidate to wear Pandora.

It is late at night. As the waves gently lap at the wharves of a fishing port, a suspicious group is lurking in the shadows. Having confirmed that there's no passersby around, they're huddled together inside a crowded boat and have turned their gaze outward.

"As you are aware, the Arcana Kingdom is currently focused on its negotiations with the new Domino regime."

The man who appears to be leading this group addresses them just loudly enough for them to hear.

"Meaning that Disaea, at the opposite end of the kingdom, is thinly guarded."

There's no need to explain who they are. They're spies, and they don't work for either the Arcana Kingdom or the Domino Republic.

There are numerous kinds of people employed as spies, but these rank in the upper echelons in terms of skill. It's clear that they're well trained operatives from how they carry themselves.

“No doubt you’re well aware, but important people from all over the region pay visits to Disaea. Among them are those who are here for neither sightseeing or normal commerce, but to conduct secret negotiations.”

Shadowy dealings between those that serve different countries, or those are here to play with fire by acting out disloyalty, or to indulge in perversions at shops that cater to tastes that can’t be spoken about in public. Because Disaea is a den of iniquity, it’s also overflowing with information that’s as valuable as gold. Knowing damning facts about VIPs from various countries is an extremely potent weapon. These spies are now trying to sneak into the country for the benefit of their own country.

“Our assignment is to bring home that information.”

To put it baldly, they’re here to dig through people’s dirty laundry and use that to blackmail them. There’s not a single person in the boat that objects to this assignment. If their dirty work can make even one person back home happy, they’re happy to blacken their hands. They take pride in their mission.

“Don’t hesitate to abandon your colleagues if necessary. And if someone is on to you, make sure to end your own life. Don’t leave any trace of your existence.”

All of them nod in silence. With that, they slowly disembark. In a sharp contrast to their difficult mission, outside the boat, it’s a peaceful night at the port. There’s not a soul there; no one is unloading cargo or fixing their own boats. Of course, the group is here because they knew that ahead of time…

“Huuuuurk!”

“Oh, dear, are you sure you’re okay?”

There are two silhouettes lit by the starlight.

“Huuuuuuurrrrrk…”

“See? I told you you were drinking too much.”

The pair clearly consists of a man who’s had far too much to drink, and a lady of the night taking care of him. It’s far too obvious that they came to get some fresh air from the nearby bar district.

“You’re such an idiot sometimes…”

“Hurrk... Urgh…”

Had it just been the man, who’s barely conscious, they might have let him go. But the woman is clearly aware of her surroundings. Perhaps she’s not drunk enough, but she’s clearly got her wits about her.

Considering the possibilities, they need to be disposed of. Fortunately, this is a port city. There’s plenty of traffic in and out of the city, and it’s not unusual for a drunk and a lady of the night to end up murdered. They’ll kill the two of them and toss them in the sea.

The group attack the pair without a shred of hesitation. Of course, they don’t run up and pounce on them like a group of amateurs. No, they silently pad toward their prey, like serpents hunting their quarry.

“Huh?”

They can only be described as unlucky. Sure, the man's at fault for getting so drunk, but it's an extreme stroke of misfortune to end up wandering into a group of spies as they're trying to get fresh air near the sea. It was a tragic story. One where the participants appeared to have basically drawn their misfortune to themselves.

"What is..."

The next morning, the port is abuzz. By the wharves is a man who's slashed his own throat, and near him are the drowned corpses of countless men and women. And none of the people who frequent the port city can recognize any of the bodies.

"Well, thank goodness the dead are all outsiders."

"Yeah, definitely."

"Wow, a group suicide."

"And not just a few."

"Dammit, we can't ship out with them in the way... What a bother."

"This is unlucky. Can't go out fishing today."

The fishermen and their families making their living in the fishing port are, of course, innocents who are completely unconnected to the evils that take place around it. The pile of dead have nothing to do with them, and those gathered near the wharves are simply there to indulge in disaster tourism.

But the guards sent from the bar district are surprised at what they find on the bodies. After checking the clothes and belongings on the corpses, they're armed with weapons and various bottles of chemicals that no honest person would carry. Further, they're hidden in inconspicuous parts of their clothing, making it clear they were here to sneak around. A cursory check of their bodies also show signs of toning. They've clearly been trained in one way or another.

"Could these be..."

"There's no 'could' about it, captain. This has gotta be the work of...the Thinking Man..."

"Don't say that name out loud!"

None of the bodies, of course, have anything to identify them. But that's what identifies the corpses as foreign spies. Yet, all of them killed themselves. There's no sign of battle, or any sign of having been restrained. Despite that, they've killed themselves. It can only be described as extremely unnatural.

"Okay, all of you, don't mention a word of this to anyone. We'll send our investigation results up the ladder, and do as they instruct. You make sure you forget you saw any of this. Understood?"

If these had been innocent citizens, there might have been those among the guards or the fishermen driven by a sense of justice or loyalty to get to the bottom of it. But this was just a group of dead foreign spies, which

means there's no need to look into the darkness. Whatever happened here last night was done for the sake of the nation.

"Saw what, captain?"

"Good."

Here in Disaea is an open secret known to everyone. Something so dangerous that everyone needs to stay as far away from it as possible.

"If you don't want to lose everything, stay the hell away from him..."

The bar district near the fishing port... In one of the luxury inns in that district, a man groans. It's Shun Ukiyo, the man considered House Disaea's ace. Having had far too much to drink the night before, he's suffering from a massive hangover in his bed.

"Urgh... Ugh..."

Even the perfectly matched wearer of Pandora can't avoid getting hungover.

"Urrgh, this is awful... Someone just put me out of my misery..."

"Stop being an idiot."

The one muttering a criticism of the pajama-clad man is his colleague and fellow transportee, Byoubu Kakejiku. Dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, she holds back as a sigh as she checks in on Shun.

"It seems there was a mass suicide at the fishing port last night. Are you behind it?"

"Ask Pandora!"

"I already asked Pandora! That useless artifact told me to ask you!"

"...I don't really remember."

"At least try to remember that! Considering how creepily and thoroughly you usually kill them, to forget at times like this... Sigh."

The Eight Sacred Treasures have special traits in addition to their functions. For example, with Eckesachs, in addition to being able to amplify magic, she can reject an individual who grabs her. That's a trait that no other Sacred Treasure is equipped with. In Pandora's case, in addition to her function of indiscriminate killing, her trait is that she draws in disaster.

Now, while she draws in disaster, she doesn't cause it. In this case, it's probably more accurate to say that they just happened upon a disaster in the making. It can be described as the exact opposite of the trait held by the Divine Chalice of Fate, Elixir.

The Lord of House Disaea had already suspected that other countries would try to send in spies to take advantage of the current confusion. That is why Shun had been assigned to locations where the spies would be relatively easy to land.

"It's true that you're off today. But that doesn't mean you should drink yourself stupid!"

"Urrrgh..."

Shun’s drunken stupor is, of course, self-inflicted. It’s not like he was ordered to do it, and it’s not as though he likes drinking that much. Nor is it a condition for wearing Pandora.

“But I think I was doing pretty well this time…”

“Nope, not at all.”

“I figured if I got plastered someone would attack me…would kill me…!”

“That’s no reason to get wasted!”

If he’s wasted and lying on the sidewalk, someone might kill him. For that stupid reason, Shun regularly gets completely wasted. It’s an obvious bit of self-destructive behavior, and perhaps it’s right for Pandora’s wearer to do so.

“Shun, let me use this opportunity to ask. Why do you want to die so much?”

The aces of the Four Great Houses almost all work directly for the Lord of the House, and as a result, they are well compensated, whether from a desire to avoid being betrayed, genuine affection, or just that they outright have that sort of value. There’s many differing reasons for it, but Shun, too, is treated very well by the Lord of House Disaea. And it seems like Shun is happy with that. At least, that’s what Byoubu thought.

“Was there something that happened in Japan?”

No doubt there are countless people in the world who want to die, but it’s hard to maintain that death wish when you’re generously paid and rewarded by a Great House, and receiving nothing but fear and respect from those around you.

“Byoubu, you’re a talented individual.”

“Wha? That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“You were only hired recently, but everyone thinks well of you.”

With the hangover, Shun’s more negative than usual. His words are overflowing with a sense of inferiority.

“No doubt you were probably treated well in Japan, even before you got your cheat abilities.”

“W-Well, sure! Given my looks, I had a lot of girls cheering me on and chasing me.”

“Well, I’m different. I may have the cheat ability of being the perfect wearer for Pandora, but that’s all I have.”

While he means every word he says, it goes against reality.

“I don’t have a hard past. I’m just an ordinary man who finds living a drag and wants to die.”

She didn’t understand what he was saying. Most people would feel a desire to live after having their desire for admiration fulfilled and richly rewarded. But instead she gets the odd answer that he’s a normal human being and wants to die more than anything.

“U-Uh, I still don’t understand what you’re saying. Sure, for a normal human being, there’ll be times where they want to die. But there’s usually a

reason behind that, like they don't feel like they're truly living, or because they hate their job."

True, Shun's job is killing, and it's not exactly a fun one, but she's heard it's a job that Shun's taken on of his own volition. It's not something he's forced to do. It's Shun's way of serving Lord Disaea.

"It's not like you hate your job. Nor do you have any problem with his lordship. So why?"

"Talented people can't understand what it's like to be average."

This weirdo keeps claiming he's just an average guy. Despite being in a situation that average people would kill for, he still won't let go of his death wish.

"I'm weak."

Suffering from his hangover, he curses his weakness for reasons unconnected to his hangover.

"Living is suffering. Talented people are those who don't let that suffering get to them. I'm so ordinary that I can't deal with that suffering."

He tries to find release in drink, in death, and he curses himself for wanting to escape to end the suffering.

"Since I can't even want to make myself stronger, I can't change myself. All I have is to take on jobs that draw the hatred of others, and hope I get my just reward, while being useful to people doing their best to live."

Because he thinks he's inferior, because he can't dedicate himself to anything, he admires people who can dedicate themselves to living. Shun will never mock those who are doing their best to face down suffering. He sincerely believes that the beauty in humanity rests in a virtue that he himself lacks.

"I'm living for the Old Man's sake. But even then… Living is so hard that I keep hoping for an accident."

The Disastrous Armor of Destruction, Pandora, that has nothing but traits that are troublesome for those in power to wield… The one perfectly suited to wearing it is a man riven with contradictions, which is why…

"Shun, I think I understand why God gave you your ability."

Byoubu, having accepted everything, gives up on ever understanding him.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up the fourth volume of “The World’s Least Interesting Master Swordsman.”

This volume, too, is the result of your support.

I’ve gone on rather pompously throughout this volume, but whether or not I, the author, have contributed to society, my company, or brought anything of worth to my family, is an open question.

It’s true that now I’m able to provide my work to you, the reader, and I’ve built up a good relationship with my publisher. And there haven’t been any major problems with the manga adaptation. (Or so I think.)

But in my last place of work, I really did cause nothing but problems, and I was never able to teach anything to those who came after me. I was a drag on my company. Honestly, I still feel guilty about that.

Given that, I always dreaded going to work. It wasn’t like I particularly liked the work, and I really didn’t like being yelled at but my superiors.

But it’s probably true that my superiors and our clients were even more frustrated than I was.

Whenever I write Sansui, I do nothing but remember my own shortcomings.

Sansui Shirokuro is my ideal.

Being able to accomplish the impossible tasks that are thrown his way, never throwing aside his responsibilities... That’s why he’s so trusted and liked by those around him.

Given that the goat my maternal grandfather owned ran away under my care, I’m nothing like him.

But now, it’s time again to give my thanks.

I’d like to once again thank Shiso for the wonderful illustrations, and my editors at PASH! Mr. Edogawa, and Mr. Kondo, thank you for continuing to support me despite my shortcomings.

-Akashi

Bonus Short Story

Succession

A detention cell, far too well appointed to be described as a “dungeon”…

The Emperor of the Domino Empire, waiting for his execution in the capital of the Domino Republic, sat waiting with a faint hope in his chest. He’s had his country usurped by Ukyou, the possessor of four of the Eight Sacred Treasures, but he’s found a ray of hope in the fact that the rebels suffered a grievous defeat in their war against the Arcana Kingdom.

The Arcana Kingdom could consider Ukyou a threat, kill him, and then take down the new regime. Then, they would liberate the captured Emperor and his relatives, restoring the Domino Empire. It’s not an impossible hope. At the very least, compared to the days where the Emperor could only sit and watch as more and more members of his family were captured, there’s possibility there.

Of course, it would end up burdening them with an enormous debt to the Arcana Kingdom, but it’s still better than having Ukyou maintain his hold on the country.

“It has been a while, has it not, Emperor.”

Hope appears in his cell. The Arcana Kingdom had destroyed the army that brought down the Empire and forced Ukyou to surrender. Arcana’s king steps into the cell accompanied by his Royal Guard.

“…The King of Arcana.”

Despite the appearance of the only man who can save him, the Emperor’s expression fills with dread.

“Glad to see you’re doing better than expected.”

The Emperor had fought a ruthless battle against his own relations to claim the throne of the Empire. No matter how desperate his state, he could still see the difference between a man here to save him and a man here to see him off.

Not only that, the King’s actions are strange. If he intended to save the Emperor, he wouldn’t come into the cell. Instead, he would have released the Emperor.

“Which is it?”

“Which of what?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Did you force the usurper to heel, or did you kill him?”

The moment the king stepped into this room, the Emperor’s fate was sealed, but that didn’t mean the same was true of Ukyou. Did he force Ukyou to heel and make Domino a client state, or did he kill Ukyou and absorb Domino? In either case, the Emperor would die, but it wouldn’t be so bad if Ukyou died with him.

“The one you dread.”

The comfort the Emperor sought in his despair vanishes in an instant as the King ruthlessly dispatches his hopes. With a cold expression born of

complete indifference, the King coolly declares an end to the Emperor. He evidently has no compassion to give to a man who's fated to die. That is how the Emperor realizes that it's the truth.

"A ridiculous choice!"

If the King's guards weren't present, the Emperor might have assaulted him. Such was his anger, but he could no longer find anything upon which to vent his rage. The man he hates more than anything in this world is assured continued survival and power. He will be the only one to die, and there's no way he can accept that.

"Certainly that man has been given treasures by God! But so what?! Does the fact he is beloved of God mean *anything* he does will go well?! That he's not allowed to lose?!"

The only thing the Emperor can do is curse fate itself. He can only curse the miserable, terrible fate that's befallen him, the man who is now the final Emperor of the Domino Empire. He curses the glory of the man who is so beloved of God that he will continue to rule Domino despite his loss.

"What have you come to do?! Are you here to gloat over my pending destruction?!"

The Emperor begins yelling at the king, as though remembering his hatreds. He screams his rage at the man who expressionlessly came to hand him his fate.

"…"

The Arcanian King watches him as though observing an interesting rare animal. The humiliation suffered by an opponent because he's in a position of absolute safety… Fully understanding that he's drawn the man's ire, he watches calmly.

"As for why I'm here, I'm here to observe your humiliation for future reference."

In terms of rare animals, there are perhaps few animals as rare as this one: the last Emperor of a failed great empire. It's not something one can usually see, even if they wanted to do so.

"Does it amuse you? Does it entertain you? So long as you leave the usurper alive, you will be next!"

The Emperor, feeling his death approach, continues to humiliate himself before the king. He was a different person from the Emperor the King had known before. There's no trace of the man who controlled a great empire, all according to his whim.

"Ukyou says that watching you motivates him as a head of state. I came to confirm that...and it seems he's right."

The King motions for the Emperor to sit. Based on his cool response, the Emperor barely regains his composure.

Because the Arcana Kingdom is now positioned above Ukyou, if the King so desires, he could save the lives of the Emperor and his family. Even if the possibility is close to nothing, offending him here would cut the possibility

off entirely. Then again, it might already be settled. But even then, he wanted to look for hope.

The King and the Emperor take their seats on chairs inside the cell. They appeared, at least, to be two equals, as they once were. But the fact that there are only guards around the King is a reminder of the reality of the situation.

“The King of the Arcana Kingdom.”

He restarts the conversation once they’re both seated. The Emperor clings to his words as he tries to convince the King.

“Does Ukyou have that much value?”

As though forgetting the humiliating display he put on earlier, he asks with complete sincerity.

“He’s a man who claimed a great cause, and took down an empire to fulfill a personal vendetta. All he has is the blessing of God. Without the Sacred Treasures, he has nothing of value.”

If Ukyou were present, he might have taken offense at that, because those words were a truth that he couldn’t deny.

“Yes, that’s true.”

The King calmly accepts that truth. At least, he accepts those words. His answer was so lacking in interest that it was clear he wasn’t paying much heed to the conversation.

“So, you, the weasel with no value outside of having been Emperor, are better than he is?”

“Wha...?!”

The Emperor is dumbstruck. He couldn’t believe that the King of the Arcana Kingdom would declare that he, a man who had been Emperor of the Domino Empire, had no value. It was one thing for a barbarian like Ukyou to hold that sentiment, but quite another for a great man like the King to do so.

“One of your retainers, the former nobleman Nuri, mentioned something to this effect. That the country would have fallen into chaos if they hadn’t obeyed the emperor.”

Knowing just how badly hurt the man in front of him is, the King continues his relentless attack.

“And that was true. Domino did, in fact, fall into chaos. So much so that they had to invade another country.”

“...Yes! That’s Ukyou’s fault! If he hadn’t fanned the flames, this country would...!”

“But the people accepted that as a fair price to pay. To put it in Disaea’s terms, they were cutting their losses.”

Tomorrow it would be him, the Emperor had said. The King fully recognized that it might well be the case. Just as Domino fell to internal strife, some day Arcana would as well. He doesn’t know how, but it’s not something that can be avoided.

It’s possible that he could be the last king of the Arcana Kingdom. It’s certainly not outside the realm of possibility. That is why he wanted to observe the man who had already failed. He wanted to use him as an example of what not to do. Because he would be executed soon, he wanted to see him while he still could.

“They felt it was better to throw the country into chaos than to obey the Emperor. Ukyou only provided the spark. It was the citizens who rose up.”

“That! That is what I mean by fanning the flames! The Arcana Kingdom will end up that way, too! Ukyou will eventually turn his attention toward Arcana’s nobles and royalty! It’ll be too late when that happens!”

The Emperor has no choice but to give up. That he no longer has any means of taking back his country. At the very least, the Arcanian King has no intention of restoring him. All he has left is to beg for mercy.

“...No doubt you’re already aware, but my entire House has been captured.”

“Of course I’m aware.”

“Then... Can you at least save the children that aren’t yet at the age of majority? I don’t ask that you treat them like royalty, just that they live.”

It was the very least he could hope for. The last wish he could hope for in the pits of despair.

“Our family has no strength left. As you’re here, no doubt he’s even captured the nobles who fled the country. In which case... There should be no gain from killing the children, and no loss in letting them live.”

It was not an order delivered by an arrogant tyrant, but a request from the head of a family. It was, perhaps, the first time in his life that he had fervently begged for anything.

“No.”

And just as he had done until he lost power, the King coolly dismisses his wish.

“All who have been captured will be killed. Every last one of them.”

“...Why?!”

“This is something we confirmed with Dainsleif, so there is no mistake. There is a girl within Arcana who bears the blood of the Imperial House. Do you understand what that means?”

“...N-No!”

The Emperor’s go wide in confusion and shock. The memory from five years ago, the one that he would have otherwise kept buried. A memory of a woman who was a member of the Imperial House but couldn’t ascend to the throne.

“The girl... Does she have silver hair?!”

“Yes. She is the daughter of one of the cadet branches of the Imperial House who lost the power struggle and escaped.”

If Ukyou had been present, he would have found immense satisfaction in the Emperor’s expression.

“R-Ridiculous… That bint’s child… That child alone…will be the only member to pass on the Imperial blood!”

“Farewell, then. I will not waste the lessons I’ve learned from you.”

At the very end, the Emperor learns that there will be someone to pass on the Imperial blood. This robbed the Emperor of the last shred of justification he possessed. The child of a woman who he hadn’t even regarded as a political rival will survive as a puppet of the Arcana Kingdom.

“That wretch’s…child…will become Emperor…?”

He falls into further despair, as the opponent he had held in such contempt has ended up winning in the end. The King leaves the Emperor to his despair and exits the cell. The King and his guards depart without a trace of remorse, without a trace of pity.

“How was he?” Ukyou, who had been waiting outside the cell, calmly asks.

“Nothing to it. A small, pitiful man. Just as you said.”

“I see.”

The supreme rulers of the Arcana Kingdom and the Domino Republic share the same opinion of the former Emperor. They both know that he is the one man they must avoid emulating.

“To see him scrape together enough dignity to ask for something for someone else, but end up only begging for the lives of his family. He asked me to spare the children. Even at this point, he understands nothing.”

“Heh.”

At the King’s exasperation, Ukyou answers with a dry laugh. With the situation well in hand, the two have room to reflect.

“If the citizens heard that, they’d probably throw stones just based on those words.”

From the Emperor’s point of view, it must have been the very least he could hope for. But, in reality, it was far too much to ask. The plea to let the children live was an unforgivable request for the citizens of the Domino Republic, who were never even given that choice.

“His crimes are such that they doomed his entire family. Why does he expect mercy now?”

“I had hoped he would have reflected as he faced death, but he’s hopeless. He truly understands nothing.”

Why had the people gone along with Ukyou’s incitement? It was because many had died as a result of the Emperor’s excessive taxation. The citizens who wanted just to survive rose in rebellion because they hadn’t even been allowed to live. The Emperor will likely never realize just how much it took for them to come to that decision.

“That he could do whatever he wants once he sits upon the throne…. He thoroughly believed that ludicrous, childish thing. He never doubted that the Emperor could do whatever he wanted, with no responsibility or duties toward the people.”

“It’s almost funny.”

“But not something one can laugh at. The worst part was that it wasn’t just him. The Imperial House and the nobles all shared that belief.”

If those around the Emperor had been decent people, they’d have found some way to exile or assassinate a tyrant. But the reason that hadn’t happened was because the Emperor’s delusions had spread as common sense to the rest of the population.

The ones who had to pay the price for that distorted common sense were the subjects of the Domino Empire. It really was something that was too awful to laugh about.

“This country was rotten long before the flames of war were ignited. I truly pity this country’s people.”

The Emperor tried to frighten the King at the prospect of revolution in the Arcana Kingdom, but the King doesn’t think that could really happen. After all, revolutions take a great deal of effort. Without extreme hardship, or far too much time and wealth on their hands, no one would ever attempt to topple the government by force. Fortunately, in the Arcana Kingdom, the vast majority of the subjects didn’t fall into either category.

“In that sense, you are, indeed, the savior of this country. You need not be so hard on yourself.”

“I don’t know… See, I, myself, lost most of my motivation the moment I took down the old regime. I thought that once the revolution succeeded, the rest would fall into place…”

“True, I cannot praise your decision to invade our kingdom. That decision did create more victims. However, at the very least, you tried to take responsibility for your failures. There’s nothing that can be done for the lost lives, but you’re still trying to atone.”

It’s true that the Domino Emperor wasn’t loved by God, but what was more important was that he didn’t love his subjects.

“That Emperor never mentioned a word about his subjects. I would have thought he would have said something about leaving his subjects in our care, either to me or to you.”

“Though, it would be awkward if he had become selfless and virtuous at the very end.”

The disgusting display of self-centeredness shown by the Emperor is a warning to themselves as rulers, and a lesson that needs to be passed on to their descendants. They want to avoid becoming that way themselves, and they want to make sure their descendants don’t end up that way, either.

“In that sense, it was good to be able to talk to him. I have a son as an heir, and I will make sure to hammer home the point.”

“Of course, I’ll do the same. To my children, who’ll eventually marry little Lain’s kids.”

“So, my daughter will marry into Lord Ukyou’s family…”

Lain, the last survivor of the old Domino Empire’s Imperial House. Hearing the explanation from Sansui, she looks thoroughly displeased.

“…What do you not like about it, Lain? It doesn’t seem such a bad deal to me…”

It didn’t seem like there was enough specificity for her to seem displeased. It’s not at a stage where she has complaints about the potential marriage partner, or that she’s really fond of her own daughter, after all. Even before all that, Lain herself doesn’t have any marriage prospects yet.

“It may be something of a burden to think that your own child will marry into another country and that your grandchildren would come to rule that country, but… That’s a good ways off…”

“Papa, try thinking a bit harder about this,” Lain says, very calmly explaining to her father what will happen in the future. “We’re going to end up related to Princess Setenve. You know, the same Princess Setenve who really hates you?”

“…”

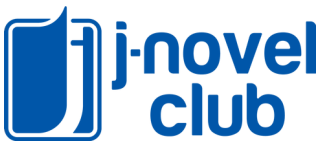
It’s true that Ukyou will be marrying Setenve, and that their child will be marrying Lain’s child. As such, Lain and Setenve will end up as in-laws. Setenve, who bears a grudge toward Sansui for defeating the Royal Guard, and Lain, Sansui’s daughter, are going to be in-laws.

“Lain… Tell your children that they can run away if they need to.”

“At least fix things between you and her by then!”

“O-Oh, of course…”

Sansui can’t help but apologize silently for being a poor father to his daughter, who’s one one-hundredth his age.



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